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TRON 2.0

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APRIL 2003

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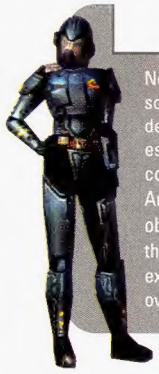

New Conglomerate soldiers struggle to destroy the old established order and conquer the planet of Auraxis." Their primary objective is to "liberate" the planet through extreme force. Anarchy over oppression!

JACKHAMMER

The Jackhammer is the New Conglomerate's primary multi-barreled heavy assault shotgun. With solid ammunition capacity and rapid-fire capabilities, it's a devastating weapon for room-to-room firefights.

NC-472CH5W3DKU-928

VANGUARD

Well balanced, the New Conglomerate Vanguard brings speed, solid armor and hefty firepower to battle. The main turret, which houses both a 150mm cannon and a 20mm machine gun, is capable of a 360-degree pivot, and can dispatch a deadly wave of liberation.

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VANU SOVEREIGNTY

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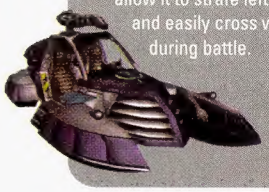
THRESHER

The Vanu Sovereignty Thresher is a heavy assault buggy built upon a gravitic drive system that replaces wheels with anti-grav pods that propel the vehicle. The deadly Flux Cannon serves as the primary weapon. The Thresher's hover capabilities allow it to strafe left or right and easily cross water during battle.

VS-551SVS4021J2-928



TERRAN REPUBLIC

Terran soldiers remain united and loyal to the old Republic while struggling to control and reunify the splintering empires. Their goal is to neutralize and regain supremacy over those who oppose the Terran Republic. Loyalty until death!

CHAINGUN

The Terran Republic's Chaingun is a heavy assault machine gun designed to rapidly shell out rounds from a generous 9mm ammo base. The speed at which it fires can easily rip apart enemy soldiers.

TR-4T1DSDFSEWU-723

PROWLER

The Terran Republic's largest battle tank, the Prowler is heavily armored with a 360-degree 100mm cannon. A secondary gunner can control a Dual 12mm Rotary Chaingun, which is stacked upon the primary turret. The Prowler can lay down more cover fire than an entire squad of infantry.

TR-4T3ESD1FDKU-723

For more information on each empire's capabilities, armor, weapons and vehicles, visit www.station.com/planetside

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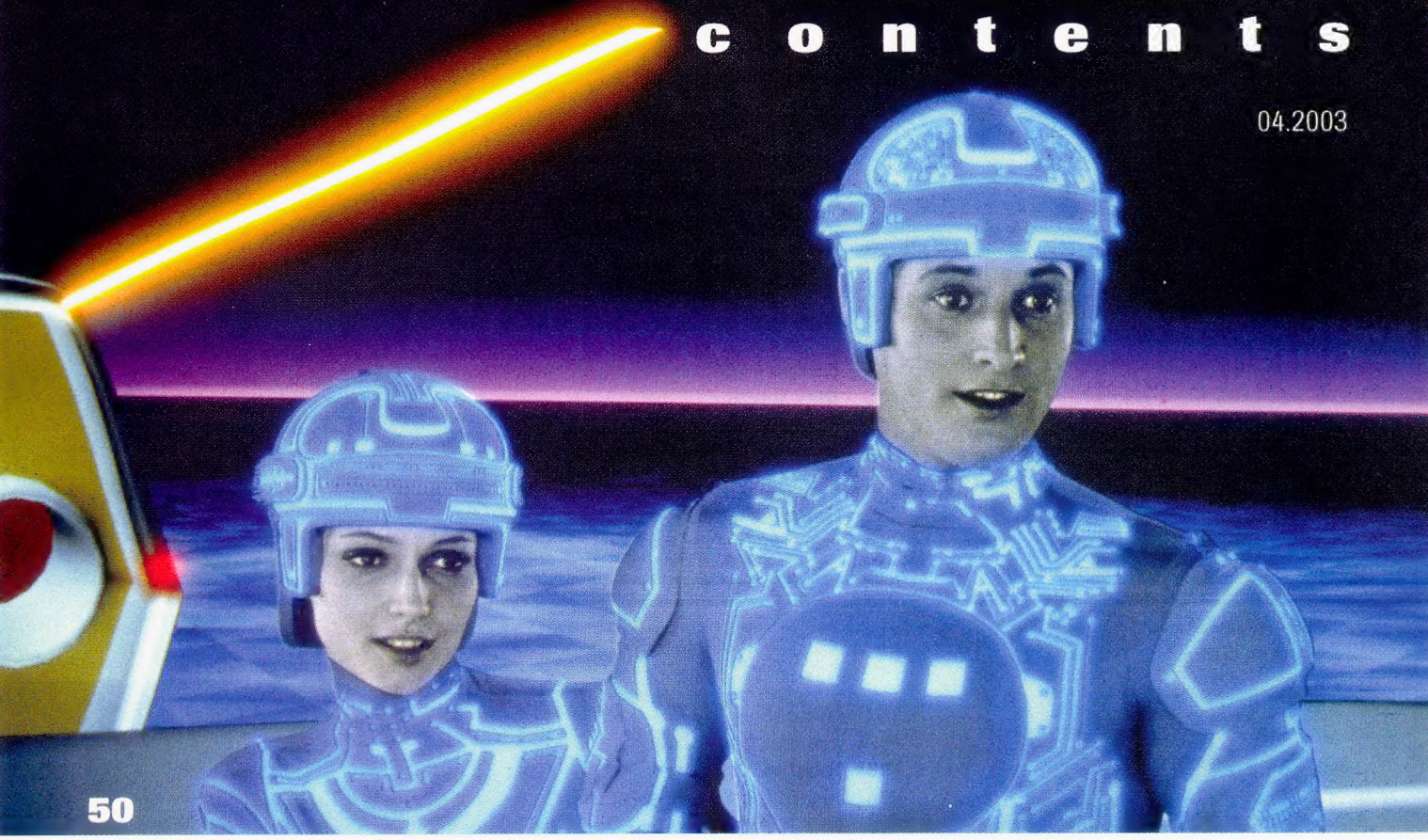

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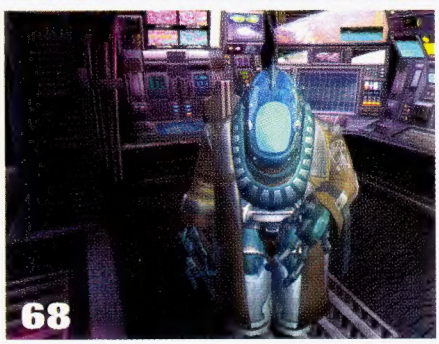

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PUBLISHER
Edward Cespedes

BUSINESS DIRECTOR
Ed Mitchell

EDITORIAL

Editor-in-Chief
Steve Bauman
sbauman@cgonline.com

Features Editor
Cindy Yans
cyans@cgonline.com

Hardware Editor
Jason Cross
jcross@cgonline.com

ART/PRODUCTION

Art Director
Terri Davis

Graphic Artist
Carolynne R. Wang

TECHNOLOGY

Online Director
Liz Halgas

ADVERTISING CONTACTS

Eastern & Central Sales Manager
Jeff Mather
802-767-9144 x531
jmather@cgonline.com

Western Sales Manager
Jeff Lubetkin
818-222-7516
jlubetkin@cgonline.com

CIRCULATION

Circulation Director
Alan Brush

SUBSCRIPTION SERVICES

US Subscriptions: 800-283-3542
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Richmond, VT 05477
802-434-3060 FAX: 802-434-6493
editor@cgonline.com

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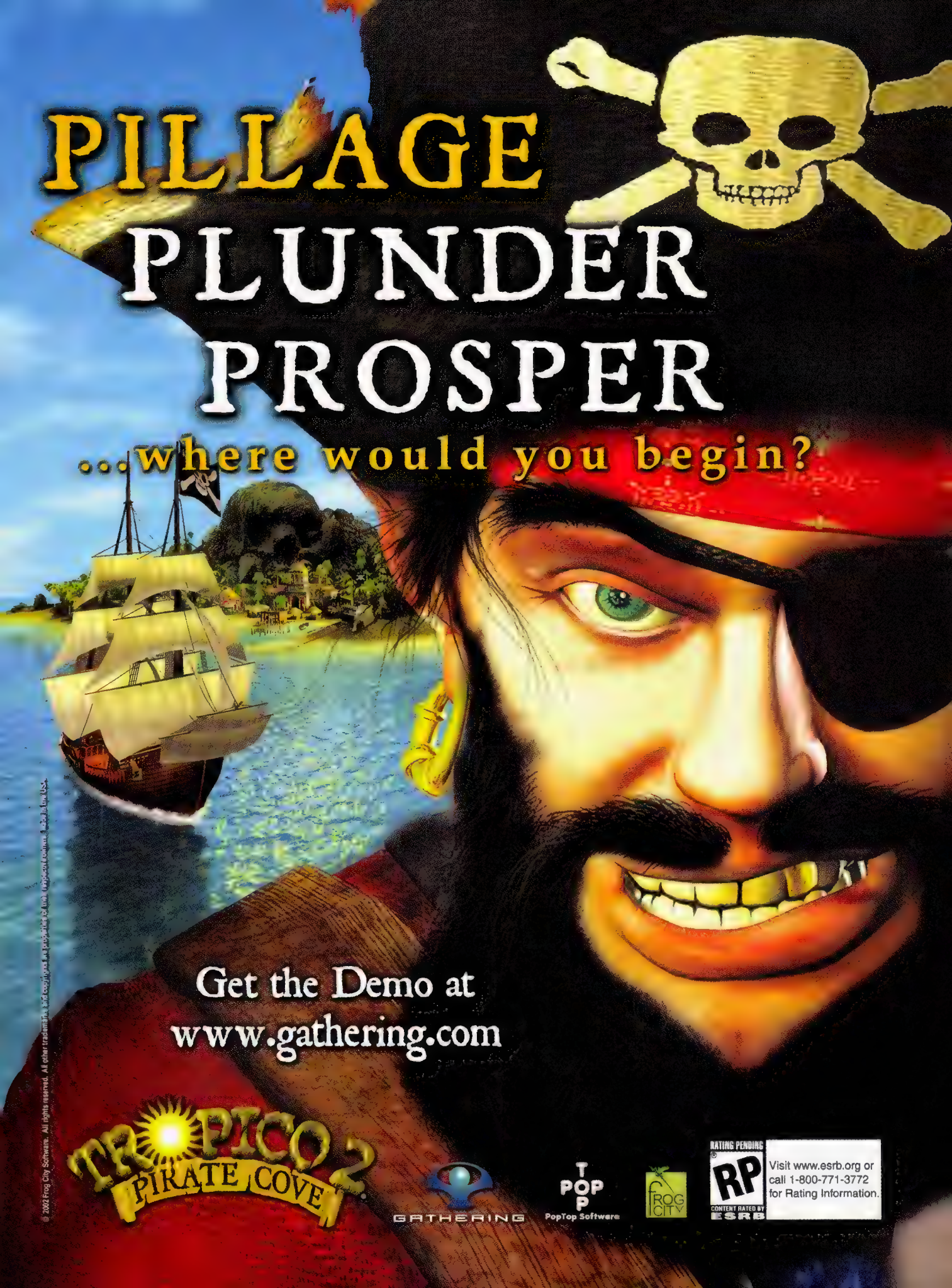
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Dig the New Breed

by steve bauman

The world of gaming is changing; it's time for us to change as well

WHEN JAN WENNER founded *Rolling Stone* in 1967, he said "We have begun a new publication reflecting what we see are the changes in rock and roll and the changes related to rock and roll." At the time, he felt that the music press had become inaccurate and irrelevant.

Computer Games Magazine is not a new publication—it's over 12 years old—but we share the feeling that other publications are becoming less relevant to the audience for computer games. According to the Interactive Digital Software Association, the average age of a PC gamer is 28 years old, with nearly half over 36. Moreover, 96% of those that actually buy PC games are over 18, and more than half have been playing games for six years or more.

Despite all evidence that the audience has matured alongside the games, game publications are "immaturing" at an alarming rate. They're all taking the *Maxim* approach, filling page-after-page with crude humor while continuing to tell women, "We don't want to play games with you; we just want to stare at your breasts." It's a sound approach, from a corporate-level marketing perspective at least, but when everyone simultaneously moves in one direction, the lack of alternatives alienates large segments of the audience.

We consider this magazine the alternative, and our new look and editorial focus reflects it. We're meeting the demand for smart, sophisticated, and entertaining reporting. While corporate pressures have turned most publications into extensions of marketing, full of shameless quote whoring, we don't produce ad copy blurbs; our goal is to provide trustworthy articles that treat readers like an adult instead of an adolescent.

Adults are considerably less flexible in their tolerance for sloppy, and lazy reporting. Once beyond a certain age, your interest in a magazine that focuses on the dating exploits of its editors or how "cool" every game is tends to wane. Younger readers are less discriminating and have a voracious appetite for information, yet despite what you get from publications that pander to their basest interests, they do want to read sharp articles about games. And they don't need anyone to tell them what's cool; they already know.

Those that try to intermingle adult-and-youth-focused coverage too often find themselves with a schizophrenic mess of a magazine. You also end up with a bunch of 30-somethings (and up) desperately trying to stay connected with their inner 15-year-old by agonizing over whether casually referencing Mudvayne or Avril Lavigne resonates stronger with a demographic they can't help having lost touch with. That's just embarrassing for everyone involved.

Aside from redesigning the interior and exterior of the magazine, we've made some subtle changes to our editorials in the past few months. When appropriate, we place a game, and its features, in some sort of context, or find peripheral topics that are interesting and relevant. The goal is to create articles with information that you cannot find in other publications. For example, the cover story on *TRON 2.0* goes well beyond merely listing—or in the case of most publications, breathlessly hyping—its features.

We've also added a new column called "Applied Game Theory." It's co-authored by Dr. Henry Jenkins and Kurt Squire. Jenkins is the Director of the Comparative Media Studies Program at MIT, and has spent his career studying media and the way people incorporate it into their lives. He testified in 1999 before the U.S. Senate during the hearings on media violence that followed the Littleton shootings and has published six books and more than fifty essays on popular culture. Squire works at MIT on the Microsoft-funded Games-to-Teach Project. His research interests include the use of games and simulations in formal learning environments, video game industry and culture, and socio-cultural learning theory and research methods. He also co-founded Joystick101.org, a site for the discussion of game design, theory, criticism, and culture.

"The goal is to create articles with information that you cannot find in other publications."

Most of the changes we've made are a direct result of what you keep telling us you want from a game magazine. So enjoy this April issue, and as always, keep sending feedback.

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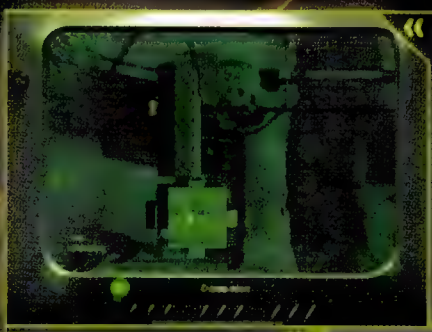

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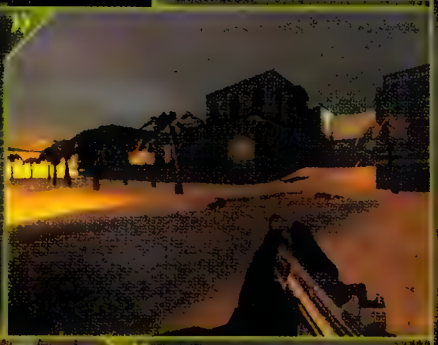

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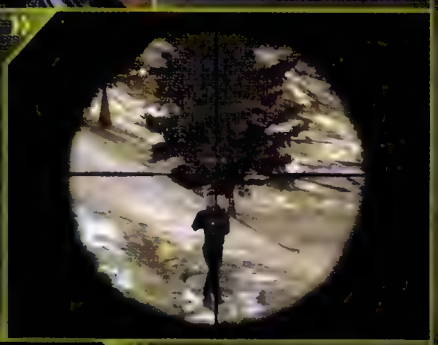
Operate a stability-sensitive weapons targeting system— experience the hostile environment of a battlezone.

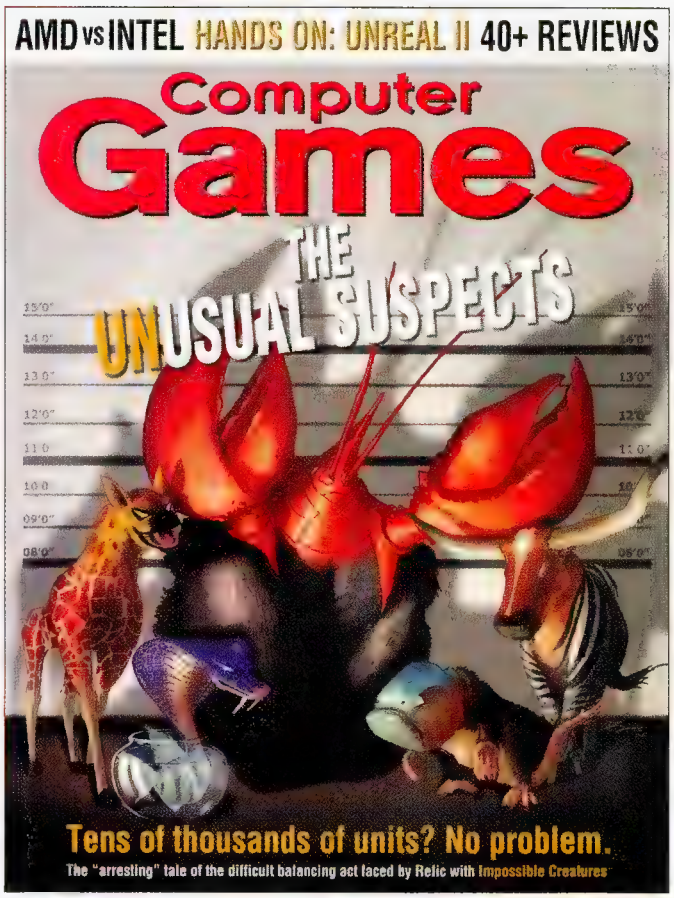


Join forces with up to 16 combatants— objective-based online multiplayer gameplay allows for complex levels of team coordination.

I.G.I.-2
COVERT STRIKE

PC CD ROM

Welcome to the new and improved Rebound! Or at least the "moved to the front of the magazine" Rebound, but it's still new, and improved with the addition of our "Questions and Answers" section. People are still writing letters about letters, continuing the discussion of the reviews of our review of *Unreal Tournament 2003*. We also received a lot of feedback for the "Death of Role-Playing" column by Cindy Yans; the volume crushed our inboxes. For those of you looking for more immediate feedback, visit our new forums at www.cgonline.com. You can also see teasers of our upcoming issues and take part in our monthly survey. *And keep sending those letters to rebound@cgonline.com*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The Death of Role-Playing

Cindy, quit looking for a choice ribeye at Steak 'N Shake! The art of online role-playing isn't gone, it's just off the beaten path, in a weed-choked abandoned lot that the mainstream computer gaming media tends to dismiss as quaint and uninteresting. Online RPGs aren't dead. They're just not where you're looking. They're not run by soulless corporations watching the bottom line, but creative individuals and teams who share a desire for building "character" and telling "stories."

Wes Platt

If only all the so-called "role-players" out there could read your article. Then, maybe they would realize how they are ruining the games they play.

Nathan Thurstoni

I think most of your points are well-taken, though I think you might have the wrong idea about game designers' role in all this talk about role-playing, or the lack of it. You seem to think that the poor designers are sitting in a corner somewhere wailing that the game they wanted to see never made it off the drawing board. What probably happens is that they kiss-ass the bean counters, and as long as they get their fat raises if a game does well, they don't give a damn whether or not their "vision" was realized. It's nice to think that the designers are somehow noble in holding to their initial principles, but bullshit. They just want to sponge up the profits like the rest of us. Oh come on. Admit it.

Aaron Maxwell

Until I read your article, I thought I was the only person who plays games who thinks that massively multiplayer online etc. may be the death of role-playing games in general. Every time I read an article about massively multiplayer being the "future" of role-playing PC games it sends a sharp chill down my spine. When classifying the types of people who would need to be satisfied, you left out the biggest group, the people who hate people.

Isaac Bruce

Your article on the death of role-playing, at least within the confines of massively multiplayer games, was a welcome sight to these tired eyes. I have been dismayed by the utter lack of any sort of advancement in the realm of so called "role playing" games on computers for, well about as long as I have known what a real role-playing game was.

Star Wars Galaxies, I'm glad to hear, has designers that agree with my stand on this and are going with a wide diversified character model instead of the linear vertical one used by seemingly everyone else. Perhaps there is hope yet and eventually role-playing games will catch up to territory where traditional pen and paper games have been blazing trails ever since someone realized that there was more to gaming then hack and slash.

David Koontz

Even More Unreal

Wow, I have to say I was extremely surprised to read all the letters bashing Tom Chick's *Unreal Tournament 2003* review in February's Rebound. Personally I thought that was the funniest, most spot-on review I'd ever read...ever. Seriously, I'm considering framing that article and hanging it on my wall. Or at least laminating it so future generations can cherish it forever.

The weird thing is, I would agree with most of what was said about why it was a bad review. Yes, it didn't have a whole lot of hard facts on what the gameplay was like. Yes, most of the offending WWF-style verbage could be turned off. But I still think it's a great review. Why? Because it perfectly captured the feeling I had after playing the actual game. As usual, it all came down to the

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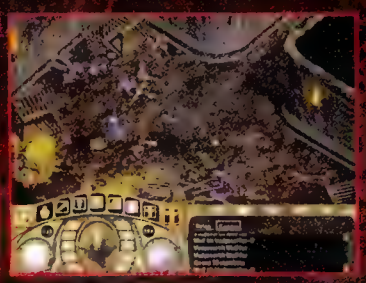

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UNUSUAL SIMILARITIES

Hey, fantastic cover in February! Vaguely familiar, though... (See the September 1997 issue, page 139...)

Steve Meretzky

Meretzky was the designer of The Space Bar, and wanted us to mention that the game is out of print, so please don't send him more e-mails asking where you can find it. And just for the record, we solely ripped off the movie for the cover concept, though the obvious similarities are pretty funny. –ed

overall feel, which was a letdown. Come on people, the fear-of-God inspiring flak cannon of the first *Tournament* was replaced by a sickly dart gun for the sequel. And don't even get me started on the bland, generic rocket launcher that bears no resemblance to the portable missile/grenade salvo launcher of the original.

I guess what I'm saying is that *Unreal Tournament 2003* isn't near as fun as the original and that was one fine piece of writing. Now if you'll excuse me, I have some dispose of some bots with my gangsta-syle double enforcers.

Aaron Smith

Just read the February edition of Rebound and boy was I amazed! It turns out people actually do play *Unreal Tournament 2003*. Not only that, they like it! How can this be possible?

Unreal Tournament 2003 is an excellent example of a game created to make money by cashing in on its built in audience. It's *Unreal Tournament* with different graphics, minus the fun.

I for one am disappointed with the game, and no longer play it.

Neal Cavner

I don't think you could have hit the nail any more on the head with your review of *Unreal Tournament 2003*. The excessively clichéd "badass, in your face" attitude that the developers took to this game is ridiculous.

Andy 'Hellfire' Robinson

Yes, I know. I'm the one in a million loser who agreed with Tom Chick about *Unreal Tournament 2003*. I'm the other one who single handedly defied fandom as we know it. I dared defy the holy name of *Unreal*, and have lost the confidence of all who follow its name. I like the game and still laughed with the review. Not because I agree with it or am his little follower that listens to his word as though he were a God, but because I understand his point of view.

It seems too often today we can't accept anyone else's view, and that ours is the only "right" one. Whether it's that hard for you to comprehend this is only dependent on how much you accept other people's views and opinions. Because writing is an art, and as any art teacher can tell you, no two drawings of the same thing will look the same coming from two different people.

Brian B.

Remaking History

This is in response to Steve Bauman's Upfront column in the February issue: I have to disagree with you on 50% of the article. On one hand, I do think game companies abuse franchises all the time. A boring character like Lara Croft, who exists in a stale world, does not deserve as many sequels as it (she?) got, especially considering how poor most of them were. Games like that only get sequels because of name recognition.

Games like *StarCraft* and *WarCraft* are a completely different issue however. First of all, I think Blizzard has enough name recognition to not have to rely on franchises to sell games. But the worlds of both series have been fleshed out more and more by previous games. Why, then, abandon something this well developed and with this much potential for more writing? I would gladly pick-up *StarCraft 2* because, if anything, I want to know what happens next.

Would I like to see a completely new game by Blizzard? Sure, but in no way would I want them to drop the pre-existing "worlds" they have created. No one tells the writers of popular TV series to suddenly drop what they are doing and write a new show. I do think that writing in computer games could stand to undergo drastic improvement; but there is no reason to forsake a creative franchise after a couple of games.

Ilya Blokh

Spelljammed

In Tom Chick's review of *Treasure Planet: Battle at Procyon*, he commented on its aesthetic—18th century sailing ships floating in outer space. I'd like to point out that this "aesthetic" is a big ripoff of *Spelljammer*, an old pencil and paper role-playing system featuring 18th century ships floating in (you guessed it) outer space.

Jacob D

Savagely Incorrect

In your preview of *Savage*, the author states, "So now S2 is introducing the world's first real-time strategy game in which the combatants are real individuals."

This statement is false. Microsoft's *Allegiance* was in fact the first to introduce this concept. It is/was an outstanding game. Give credit where credit is due.

Adam Altmann

Very Special Letters

This is only the beta of this e-mail. Gimme 50 bucks and some beer and I'll give you the full version.

Ted

Can you guys send me the specially targeted pre-release version of your magazine that only includes the spicy pictures of -ed? Don't bother making it in color or including articles, because I don't read them anyway and it slows down my system.

crash audiojack

It's in the mail, but it does include coverage of the lineup from the gaming "fools" at Schadenfreude Interactive, a new company making its debut in this April issue. –ed

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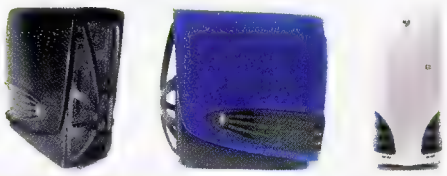

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You have questions, we have answers. While the main part of Rebound handles all of your general magazine questions and requests for hot and sweaty pictures of Sam Fisher, this is the new location for all of your questions about hardware and technology. While we can't really answer "what video card should I buy" (we have reviews for that purpose), we can explain what some of that wacky language on the side of a video card box really means. *Send those questions to qa@cgonline.com.*

Q: A while ago, I installed a new sound card into my system. I noticed on the back of the computer there was a little switch, which I believe connects to the power supply. It is currently set at 115v and the other setting I think is 220v. If I was to switch it to the higher setting, would it make a difference in my computer or would it destroy it with the extra power?

Josh

A: *That switch has nothing to do with the output of your power supply, but rather the power input for it. It's the setting for the voltage coming from the wall, which in the U.S. is 110 volts, so you pick 115v (I'm not sure where that extra 5 volts on a power supply comes from). The other setting is typically 230v, and if you lived in a country where the standard voltage regulation was 220v like China, Finland, or Germany, you'd want to use that instead. Odds are that if you flipped it to 230v your computer wouldn't even turn on, but it's possible it could cause some damage, so don't try it.*

Q: How can I safely clean my LCD monitor without damaging it?

James P.

A: *Cleaning an LCD monitor is basically just like cleaning a CRT. You want to avoid any sort of cleaning solution based on alcohol or ammonia, as they can damage the screen or at the very least its anti-glare coating. You should even avoid some "monitor wipes" that contain harsh solvents. And never use Windex. Simply dampen a very clean soft cloth or paper towel with water give the screen a good wipe-down. There are special monitor cleaning solutions like Klear Screen that are safe and do a good job, but you only need that if your screen somehow has something on it that a damp cloth won't wipe off. And if that's the case, you need to be more careful with your monitor.*

Q: My system is a dual-processor Pentium III 550 machine. When I first got it, it was fast enough to easily run the games of several years ago, but recently with these newfangled games it started to lag. I got an ATI Radeon 9000 Pro, but I really don't know exactly what to tweak to get the most performance possible out of the machine so that I don't have to trade in anytime soon. The computer was previously used for networking; what should I do to maximize efficiency?

Nathan S.

A: *First, make sure you have plenty of RAM, 256MB minimum, 512MB is better. Defragment your hard drive every few weeks and make sure that you don't have any spyware or background programs running (visit www.lavasoft.com and check out AdAware). Those basic tasks should help speed things up a bit, but you're still not going to be able to run modern high-end games very well. As far as games are concerned, you're running a single 550MHz processor, since most don't take advantage of dual-processor systems. 550MHz was great several years ago, but I've not seen a single computer that doesn't start to come up short in games after two years. It's not what you want to hear, but if your computer is over two years old, you need to consider an upgrade, not some tweaks. It's sad but true: we don't buy computers, we rent them.*

Q: I am wondering why, when a review is done on a motherboard that offers on-board sound, nothing is said about its quality or features. I understand that stand-alone cards are much better in many cases, but some of the sound options available on motherboards must be of an acceptable quality. In the future, could more be said about this issue?

D. Homa

A: *This isn't much of an issue with our magazine, since we very rarely review individual motherboards. If and when we do, we'll certainly let you know about the quality and features of the on-board audio (as was the case with the launch of the nForce motherboard chipset from NVIDIA).*

You're right that some built in audio solutions on motherboards are acceptable. In fact, many are far better than merely "acceptable." The nForce audio processing capabilities are very good and are less demanding on the CPU than many add-in cards. VIA, a manufacturer of many motherboard chips, has an excellent audio processor in the Envy24 line, which may find its way onto motherboards soon. It should be noted that whatever the capabilities of the audio processor a motherboard uses, different brands and models may employ varies different digital-to-analog converters and have greater or fewer outputs. So two different motherboards with the same audio processor built in might give you different sound quality or support different speaker setups.

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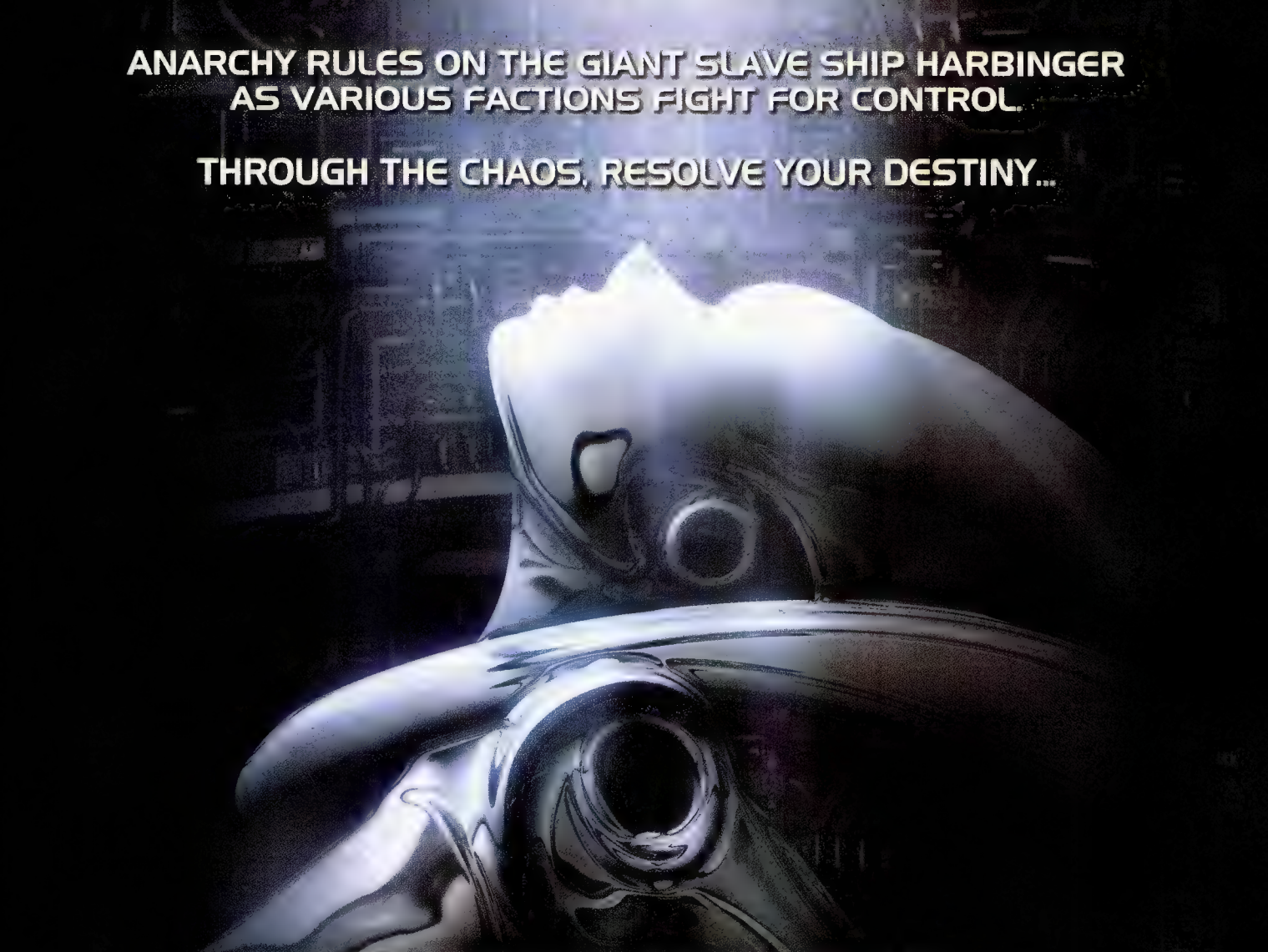

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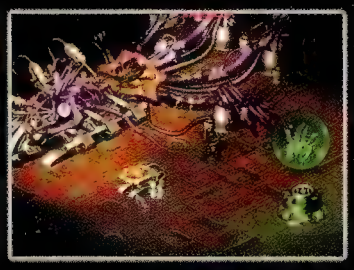

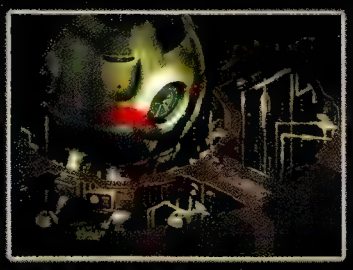

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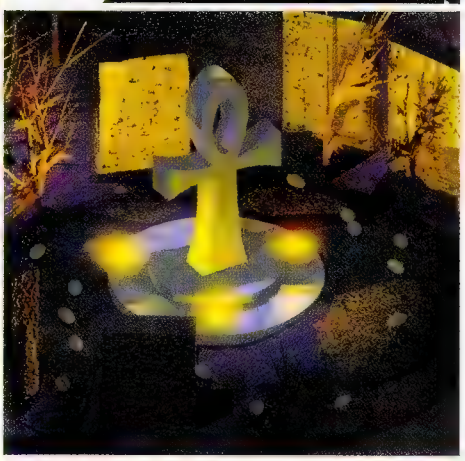


[left] The remade Shadowlords from Ultima V. [top] The Starflight remake actually has permission from the license holder. [above] Concept Art from Ultima IV, but is the remake truly virtuous?

The Remake Risk

Fans who want to recreate their past favorites may be in for a surprise when the lawyers come a callin'. Maybe you can't go home again BY ANDREW S. BUB

WHO WOULDN'T WANT to go home again? In game terms, who wouldn't want to revisit classic game locales from their past using today's technology? Fans and amateur programmers have banded together to remake forgotten classics and to prove their chops as game designers. Right now, there are teams remaking *Starflight*, *X-COM*, and just about every game in the prolific *Ultima* series. And why shouldn't they? "We don't like developers just sitting on IP [intellectual property]," says one team leader who wished to remain anonymous. "It just seems selfish." In speaking with several teams working on remakes, they all say that these games still have devoted fan bases who eagerly see what these garage programmers can come up with.

Sounds like a win/win doesn't it? They get experience making games and fans get to revisit Britannia using a GeForce 4 video card or duel with a 2GHz-armed Shodan. But, of course, there's the hitch: What about the companies that actually own these games? Until recently, they've mostly remained silent, and it's virtually impossible to find a remake project shut down by the license holder. Stories of Lucasfilm going after *Star Wars* mods and 20th Century Fox going after those based on *Alien* (thus creating the term "Foxed," meaning to be shut down) are true, but remakes are a totally different situation.

Recent statements by Electronic Arts, owner of Origin Systems and the *Ultima* IP since 1992, help clarify what their position might end up being, by shining a new light on the risks inherent in remaking older games. In an article from Wired Magazine's October 2001 issue, and another from the website Games Domain, EA vice president of corporate communications Jeff Brown stated unequivocally that EA owns the rights to *Ultima* and all of its characters, and in all cases, no permission was requested or granted to the people working on remakes.

The remake teams beg to differ, saying they have repeatedly tried to contact Origin Systems and parent company Electronic Arts for permission and received instead no answer. At least two teams claim to have been trying since 1999, and say they have signed FedEx receipts to prove their

requests were received.

Virtually all the *Ultima* teams were given permission by Richard Garriott, creator of the series, founder of Origin Systems, and the owner of his game namesake Lord British. While Garriott retained the rights to that character, when asked to comment on the situation, he is quick to point out that he doesn't have the legal right to grant permission to use *Ultima*. "As the author of the *Ultima* Series, I've been flattered and impressed by developers who have made or attempted remakes of early *Ultimas*," he says. "As the machines that they could be played on disappear, it is often the only way anyone will be exposed to those early creations even if in an altered improved state. As a creator who would love for his art to survive, I'm all for it!" But he cautions that EA has every right, and even the obligation, to protect itself and it's property in any way they see fit.

"As the author of the Ultima Series, I've been flattered and impressed by developers who have made or attempted remakes of early Ultimas... as a creator, who would love for his art to survive, I'm all for [them]." —RICHARD GARRIOTT

EA's silence, and the threat of what they could do to a finished product, has dissuaded at least one team directly. The Peroxide team recently renamed its *Ultima 1* remake *Era: The Arkenthrone*. Another team did the same with a project based originally on the EA-owned *Bard's Tale* series of games, continuing on as *Devil Whiskey*, a game that plays like early-to-mid 80s role-playing game but avoids all trademark and/or copyright infringement.

While no one would comment on the legality of the *X-COM* remake, those working on *Starflight* did contact the original creators to ask for permission. "I didn't feel it would be right of me to use these without asking for permission," says team member Peter Fischell, adding that, as a bonus, he's befriended T.C. Lee, one of the original *Starflight* creators who has his own project in the works, *Starflight III*. When asked if he would have proceeded without permission, Fischell says no, but says that Internet fans told him that he could continue the project so long as he didn't make a profit from it. This is a common misconception among remake teams, who almost universally believe they're legally covered by a legal doctrine called "Fair Use."

They're not. Robert de los Reyes, a lawyer and *CGM* contributor, clarifies the legal situation. "While gamers might be disappointed that EA hasn't re-released the older *Ultima* games, we are not entitled to the self-help of releasing it for them," he explained. "It makes no difference whether they give the remake away or sell it." Fair Use is only applicable in a number of limited cases, like news reporting, parody, or works created for educational use or study.

At the time of this writing, no IP holder has exercised its option to halt these remakes. And there's good reason for them not to. "I think keeping fan-interest in the *Ultima* property is a good thing for Electronic Arts," says Garriott. He notes that EA might want to revisit the series one day, and remakes can only draw attention to the property and act as free publicity, and halting them may have a detrimental PR effect.

Regardless, most of these remake teams are forging ahead undaunted. And with growing access to editing tools like those shipped with *Morrowind*, *Dungeon Siege*, and *Neverwinter Nights*, these projects are getting easier and easier to make. More are sure to crop up and, eventually license holders will be forced to confront the issue. Ultimately, the license holders will dictate whether or not fans get to play these remakes, and these teams all have to face the prospect that all their work may come to nothing but a legal headache.

In the works

There are more remakes than you'd believe, many are arcade classics, many are amateurish, and here's a few of the most promising:

AKALABETH
Richard Garriott's first game (self-published and sold in ziplocks) and the inspiration for all things *Ultima*.
www.geocities.com/AkalabethRemake

KINGS QUEST II/QUEST FOR GLORY II
Two Sierra classics being remade by Tierra Entertainment.
www.tierraentertainment.com

TRANSPORT TYCOON
A remake of the Chris Taylor classic. The site is available in French and English.
ibelgique.ifrance.com/transport2

MARATHON RESURRECTION
A new look at the Mac shooter classic. It has received the blessing of its original creator, Bungie Software.
resurrection.bungie.org

STARFLIGHT
Crafted with love for the fun of it and with full permission from the IP holder for the *Starflight* series.
www.starflight-remake.com

X-COM
A remake of the original game, made by fans. Rumor has it Firaxis may have obtained the license for this series.
www.xcomufo.com

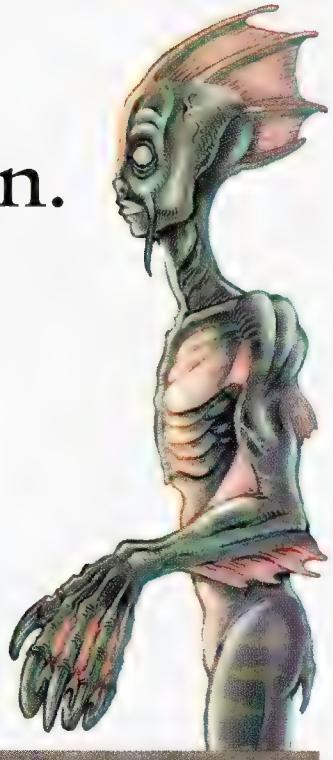
ULTIMA IV: THE DAWN OF VIRTUE
A remake of one of the most popular role-playing games ever made.
www.hut.fi/%7Ejtpelto2/ultima4/

ULTIMA V: THE LAZARUS PROJECT
This remake uses the Dungeon Siege engine.
www.u5lazarus.com

ULTIMA IX: REDEMPTION
Not a remake, an extension of *Ultima IX*. The team wants to end the *Ultima* series in a more fitting way than EA did with *Ascension*. The team leader is a student at Purdue and this is also a degree related project:
web.ics.purdue.edu/~fountain

EverQuest Expands. Again.

In case you don't have enough EverQuest in your life, The Legacy of Ykesha emerges



EARLIER THIS YEAR, Sony announced the first downloadable expansion for its best-selling online role-playing game. To accompany *EverQuest* Vanilla, *Kunark*, *Velious*, *Luclin*, and *Planes of Power* comes another add-on framed by new World Lore (for which the team is famous). This time, the Troll Clans step up to the plate. Warlord Ykesha, head of his Clan, received a long-forgotten stone that contained the prophecy of the coming of the Grozmok who would unite the Troll Clans through Fear and Hate [think "deity"]. Ykesha (not a modest sort) viewed himself as the Grozmok from the prophecy, and declared that it was so. He was wrong. The stone changed hands many times, causing much angst, and finally made full-scale war inevitable.

Sony first revealed information about it on the *Legacy of Ykesha* website beginning on January 14th, unveiling one feature at a time every three or four days (sometimes combined with new lore, sometimes not), until all pieces became available by February 21st. In addition to tantalizing its core audience with shiny, dangling undescribed features, this method also gave Sony the opportunity to set up a lower-priced pre-order period, during which (after payment, of course) the buyers would be able to download a new patch-piece of the game on the occasion of each feature revelation. Hand it to Sony, since not only did this method keep the cash flow alive, it also avoided a massive, server-stunning download on Day One of the final release.

The feature-set contains all the usual enhancements—new spells, creatures, map, items, enhanced GUI, etc.—but best of all, you can now play as a frog. Ribbit. *—Cindy Yans*

Dmitrij From H.A.R.M

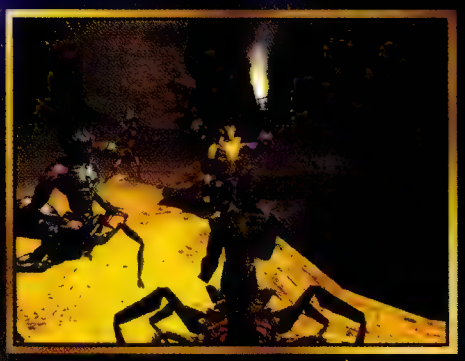
Another top game of 2002 is expanding, but with an evil twist

DEVELOPER Monolith Productions is producing its first expansion for *No One Lives Forever 2*. The untitled game, which is due later this year, doesn't put you in the stylish shoes of British superspy and fashion trendsetter Cate Archer; instead, it will let you take the reins of a third-party contractor who reports directly to the leader of H.A.R.M., Dmitrij Volkov.

At this point, Craig Hubbard, Creative Director at Monolith and the Lead Designer for the series, is keeping most of the specific details under wraps. "While we're keeping your mission objective top secret at this point," he says, "we can disclose that the emphasis will be on over-the-top action rather than stealth." If the strange weaponry of *NOLF 2* is any indication, expect to wield anything from a carrot to a small furry animal (note: these are not real weapons from the game... duh).

In case anyone is concerned about controlling just any old run-of-the-mill contractor, Hubbard insists that your character will be very evil. *—Steve Bauman*

The best RPG... just got better.



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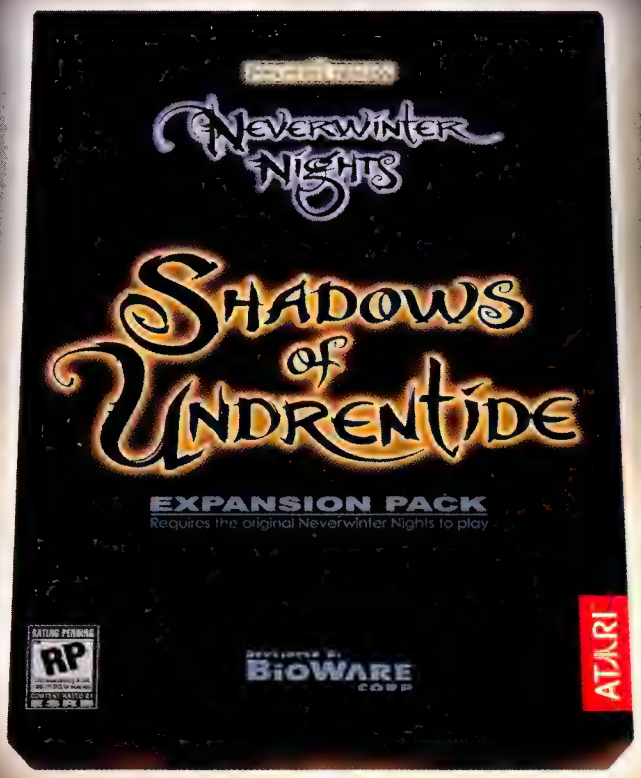

Powerful new and deadly devices are available to adventure designers through scripting - including projectile traps. The recently released Plot Wizard makes adventure creation easier than ever!

Pentium 4

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FROM THE CREATORS OF

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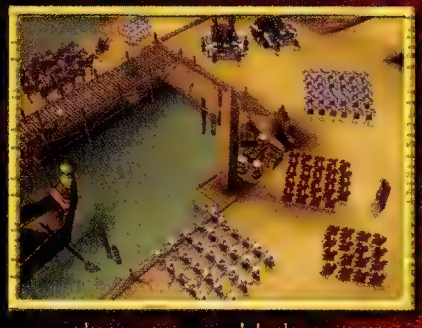

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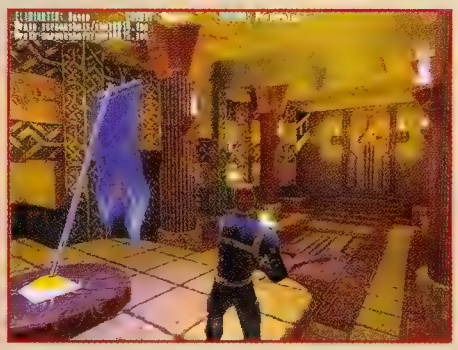

THIEVERY: Neither Thief nor its sequel looked as good as Thievery; TEAM ELITE: Battle in a Klingon temple in Team Elite 1.4; CORAL SEA: Reenact the Battle of the Coral Sea in Battlefield 1942.

Garrett Online

Sick of waiting for Ion Storm to finish *Thief III*? If so, pick up a copy of *Unreal Tournament* and download the "Thievery" total conversion. Dalai and the Thievery UT team of more than 20 coders, modelers, and mappers have crafted an impressive mod that recreates the moody atmosphere of Looking Glass's *Thief: The Dark Project* and *Thief II: The Metal Age* with the aid of the highly customizable *Unreal Tournament* engine. Gameplay is somewhat different than you might expect, however. The two game types move the sneaking and stealing focus of the original *Thief* games to the multiplayer arena. In Thieves vs. Guards, you sign up with a team of guards or a team of thieves, the objective being to either prevent a heist or pull one off. Thiefmatch pits taffers against each other in a competition to achieve mission objectives. Eleven gorgeous maps are included with the current beta build, along with new thief and guard models, enhanced sound effects, a selection of new medieval weapons, and rewritten artificial intelligence for bots. The forthcoming 1.3 patch will add at least six more maps and nifty little weapons like fire arrows.

Animal Crackers

Ten more animals can be added to the already formidable menagerie available in Relic Entertainment's *Impossible Creatures*. Download *IX*LedMirage's script from Insomniax.net and you'll unlock a dolphin, garfish, horse, kangaroo, moose, rattlesnake, raven, walrus, warthog, and wooly mammoth for use in your cross-breeding endeavors. More information on these animals—which are provided with every copy of *Impossible Creatures* but are locked out due to promotional use for preorders—can be found in the "IC Bonus Animal Guide" .pdf file in the "Goodies" subdirectory of the "Impossible Creatures" folder on your hard drive.

Beach Fights

Digital Illusions has released a new official map for *Battlefield 1942*. Coral Sea features fleet combat in the Pacific Theater of operations, with victory conditions that center on the sinking of an enemy carrier and flying through a buoy left floating amidst the wreckage. Dogfight specialists and those who like manning AA guns will have the most fun with this 16.6MB map.

Split-Level Suburban

Morrowind fans shouldn't miss this one. HB has designed a new plug-in that allows you to purchase a private mobile base that can be docked at any of 12 locations around Balmora, Ald-ruhn, Vivec, Sadrith Mora, Caldera, and Mournhold. The tiny file lets you purchase the movable mansion from Shenk's Shovel in Caldera for the slightly outrageous sum of 1.5 million gold pieces. You get a lot for that Fifth Avenue price, though. Amenities include numerous bedrooms, storage rooms, an alchemy lab, a swimming pool, and an observation deck that features a breathtaking view that comes in handy when hovering over a city. A further 30 luxuries can be purchased as well, such as extra rooms and Propylon indices. You can get the private mobile base plug-in from Fileplanet or any of the leading *Morrowind* sites like Morrowind Summit.

Team-Based Trek

Team-based multiplayer action has come to *Star Trek Voyager: Elite Force*. Team EF has just released Team Elite 1.4, a Star Trek version of Team Fortress. It features 12 balanced classes, each with specialized abilities. The Commander, for example, can fire a beacon that calls in an airstrike courtesy of Tom Paris's Delta Flyer (yeah, I've watched more than a few episodes of the series), while the Starfleet Marine has enhanced speed and jumping skills, the Technician can reload the weapons of teammates, and the Hologram can use a cloaking device to hide. Team Elite 1.4 doesn't require the *Elite Force* expansion pack, although some images may not show up if you don't have it installed.

Links

Thievery **www.thieveryut.com**

Insomniax.net **www.insomniax.net**

Relic Developer Network **www.relic.com/rdn**

Battlefield Central Files **www.bfcentral.com**

Fileplanet **www.fileplanet.com**

Morrowind Summit **www.rpgplanet.com/morrowind**

Team Elite **dynamic5.gamespy.com/~thesynapse/team_elite**

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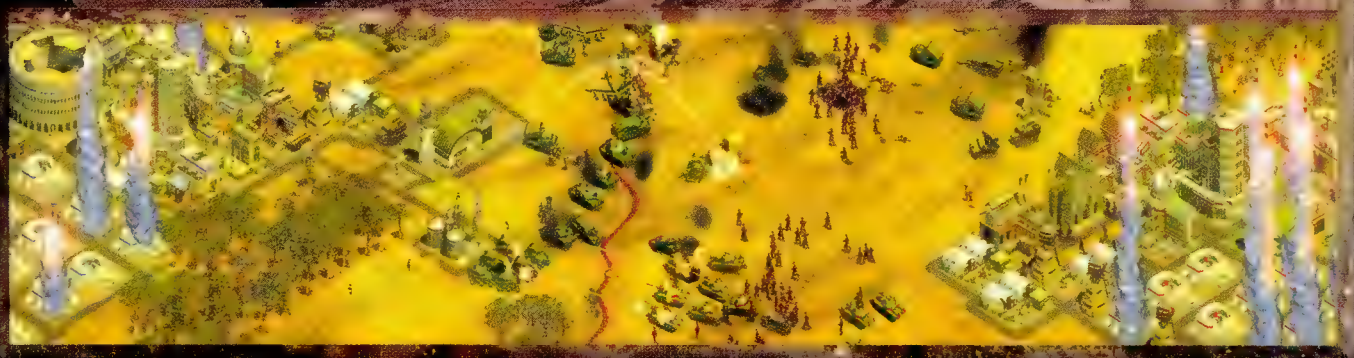
RISE OF NATIONS



MAKE HISTORY

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RISE OF NATIONS

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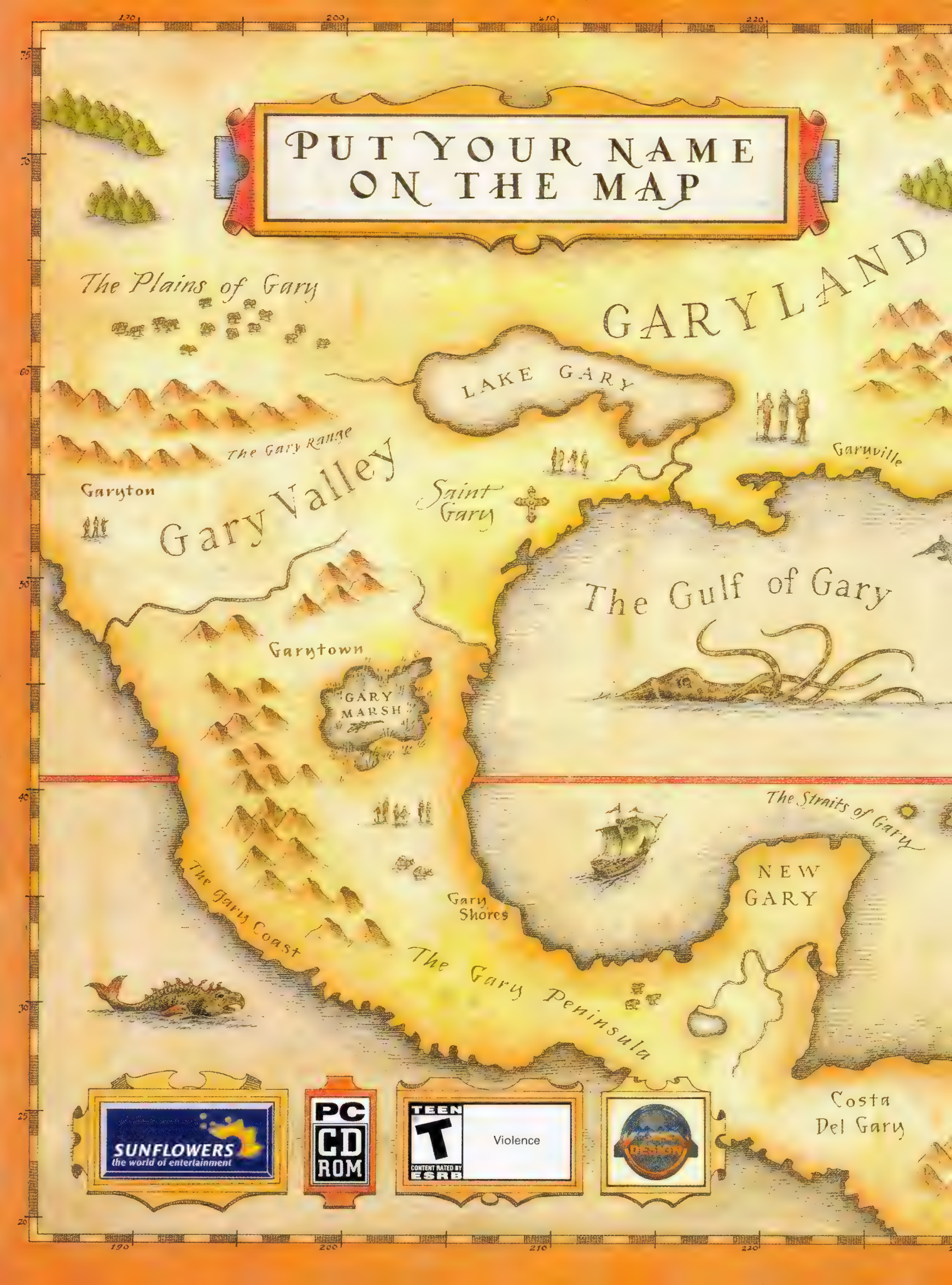
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LAKE GARY
The Gary Range
Garyville
Garyton
Gary Valley
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The battles may be just as splendid, but they've pumped down the difficulty level.

Sex and the Single Werewolf

Bloodmoon rising: A new ***Elder Scrolls*** *expansion brings a lust for blood to the series*

BY CINDY YANS

THE ELDER SCROLLS series celebrates its tenth birthday this year, finally realizing its goal of becoming the *Very Mature Scrolls*, at least in the time frame of computer role-playing games. While Bethesda's baby scroll, *The Elder Scrolls: Arena*, got a fair amount of recognition, the series didn't really bloom until 1996's middle-child, the notoriously buggy *Daggerfall*, won just about every award to be had for that year.

The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind is one of the richest RPGs to appear in a long time. Of course an expansion was inevitable, and *Tribunal* was released late last year, much to the pleasure of fans at being able to continue their journey forthwith through Morrowind, the northeast most prefecture of the Tamrielic Empire. Since, thanks to the ever-evolving construction set tool that ships with the original *Morrowind*, the developers seem to be able to crank out expansions like assembly line widgets, it may not be a huge surprise that another one is in the works, *The Elder Scrolls III: Bloodmoon*.

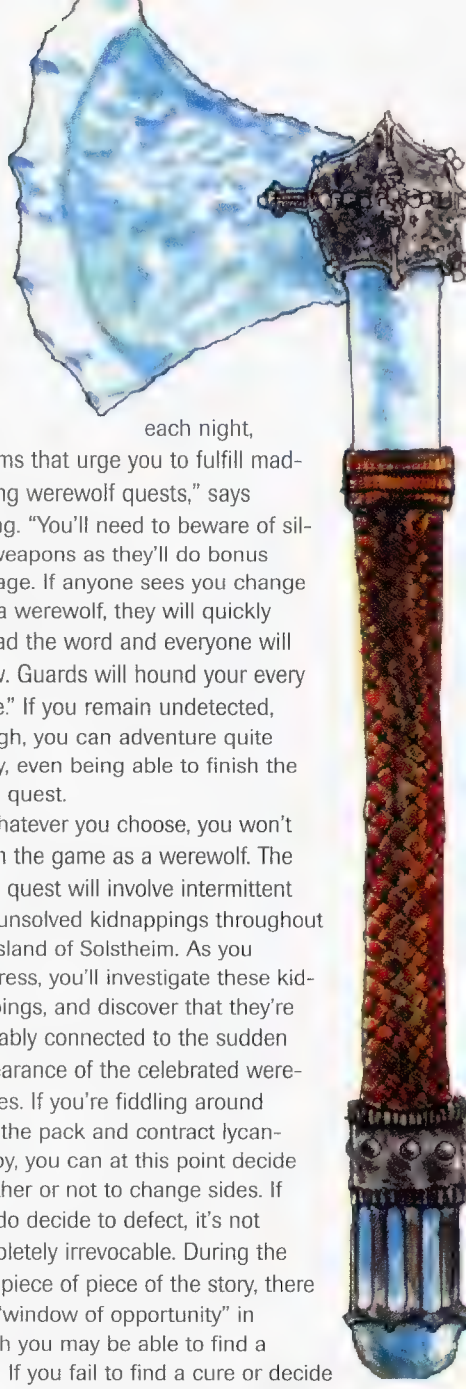
While Morrowind used to belong to the First Empire of the Nords, you entered it as a much darker place, the land of the Dark Elves. It was a different game world than either of its predecessors', and *Tribunal* is set in and about its capital city of Mournhold. *Bloodmoon*, however, takes you to another much colder place, The Frozen Island of Solstheim, where the Empire is establishing a new mining colony. You arrive there by ship from Vvardenfell and will notice the gray and rainy woodlands of Morrowind turn into ice and snow-covered forests. There's Big Trouble in Little Solstheim, however. A prophecy of The Bloodmoon looms, and the land is fraught with rumors of werewolves.

You've got to love werewolves. They stand right up there with other interactive favorites such as pirates, vampires, and papal nuncios. Since the cancellation of DreamForge's adaptation of White Wolf's *Werewolf: The Apocalypse*, people have probably been howling to sink their teeth into a game offering the werewolf experience, and here you'll be able to see it from either side of the pelt. You can either defend the colony against frost trolls, ice minions, and the like, and take control over how it is built up while trying to eliminate the werewolves, or you can be a turncoat and play as Wolfman Jack.

"It's something we've always talked about, doing werewolves," says Executive Producer Todd Howard. "There's a big allure to having your character become something new. We also wanted to do something that looked and felt different from the areas in Morrowind." According to Project Leader Ashley Cheng, *Elder Scrolls* fans have been asking for the werewolf connection for quite some time.

The developers believe that playing as a werewolf will completely change the way you play the game. You'll get bonuses to your strength, agility, and speed, and gain a new ability called Eye of the Wolf. If you decide to be fur-bound, you will attack with your claws rather than using weapons or spells. "Insane dreams will haunt you each night, dreams that urge you to fulfill maddening werewolf quests," says Cheng. "You'll need to beware of silver weapons as they'll do bonus damage. If anyone sees you change into a werewolf, they will quickly spread the word and everyone will know. Guards will hound your every move." If you remain undetected, though, you can adventure quite freely, even being able to finish the main quest.

[left] While nothing much was done to improve the engine, the creatures still look great; [top]Hands up, or I'll shoot! I mean, uh, slash; [bottom] Even in a blizzard, you'd better hope your shield is up.



Whatever you choose, you won't begin the game as a werewolf. The main quest will involve intermittent and unsolved kidnappings throughout the island of Solstheim. As you progress, you'll investigate these kidnappings, and discover that they're probably connected to the sudden appearance of the celebrated werewolves. If you're fiddling around with the pack and contract lycanthropy, you can at this point decide whether or not to change sides. If you do decide to defect, it's not completely irrevocable. During the next piece of piece of the story, there is a "window of opportunity" in which you may be able to find a cure. If you fail to find a cure or decide to stay a werewolf, you can continue along the main quest and finish the game.

Finishing the main quest, though, might not be easy. *Tribunal* required you to have some pretty high-level characters to work your way through its pitfalls, and *Bloodmoon* will continue along those lines, but perhaps not quite as rigorously. "Bloodmoon is similar [to *Tribunal*], but more 'leveled,' which was our intent with *Tribunal*—meaning there are more creatures that set themselves to your level," says Howard. "I'd say it has bad guys that are as hard as the ones in *Tribunal*, but not as many of them. *Tribunal* really had too many hard enemies."

If you do happen to have lower level

[above] The ice and snow make the setting feel not one bit like the forests of Morrowind; [right] The walrus-esque Horker is only one of the denizens roaming the glacier.

characters (which Cheng calls "teeny boppers"), you'll still be able to explore the new island, and plow through a few dungeons. These same dungeons will offer more difficult challenges to higher-level characters (which he calls "thirtysomethings"), and if you're a truly hard-core player who has spent many long hours ignoring the real world and actually completing *Morrowind* and *Tribunal* ("i.e. Bea Arthur," jokes Cheng), then they've added a whole extra layer to the leveled lists. So, yes, they're attempting to offer something for everyone.

"The one thing we felt *Tribunal* lacked was the ability to just wander the landscape and look for dungeons to explore or creatures to fight," says Cheng. To fill this hole, they have ensured that *Bloodmoon* will have many more locations and side quests. There's a rowdy mead hall (read "sleazy bar") called Thirsk with lots of drunken Nords, a frozen lake full of new creatures called Horkers, a mysterious ice castle that sits on the northern coast, and lots of ice caves and Nordic burial tombs to explore and loot.

Bethesda has now come up with two almost contiguous expansions, and given the success of *Morrowind*, it is most probably working on another full-fledged release. Any day now? Nah, *Morrowind* surfaced significantly after *Daggerfall*, so it'll probably be quite some time before we see its sequel, *The Really Old Scrolls*.

DEVELOPER / PUBLISHER Bethesda Softworks • RELEASE DATE Summer 2003

WarCraft III: Frozen Throne

Developer/Publisher **Blizzard**

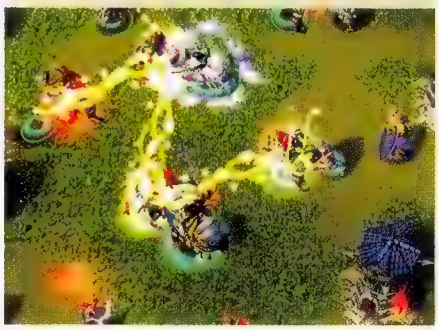
Release Date **Summer 2003**

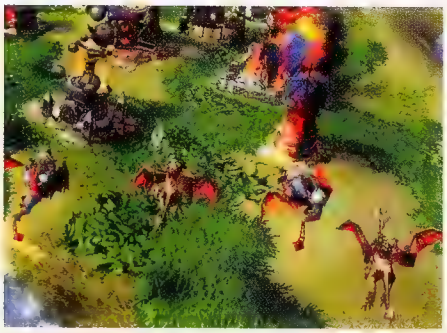
MEMBERS OF THE loyal following of *WarCraft III* fans should be pleased to hear that they can expect its first expansion set, *Frozen Throne*, to cool off their summer. The world of *WarCraft* has always had an immense backstory, so it's not surprising that the story continues forthwith. <In the most deep and threatening voice of the narrator from *WarCraft II*> "The evil Lich King Ner'zhul has been imprisoned inside the Icecrown glacier, deep within the arctic continent of Northrend. Although the former Orc Shaman lacks physical form, his soul lives on, forever seeking a means to escape his icy prison. As the saga continues, it is revealed that both the Night Elf renegade, Illidan, and the traitorous Death Knight, Arthas, seek the Icecrown glacier and the mysterious powers found inside."

Blizzard promises a number of enhancements. You can look forward to one new hero per race (the Humans will have the Blood Mage, a Blood Elven spellcaster), a frying pan full of new units, each of them with its own verbal mark of "zug-zug-osity." One new human unit is the Blood Elf Spell Breaker, sort of a mage/thief hybrid who is immune to spells, but who can cast "Spell Steal," which debuffs and then recruits enemy units. Of the three new tile sets, the first one is the Sunken Ruins, a tropical rain forest, and you can probably bet heavily on a tundra set—after all, frozen throne... icy prison... Icecrown glacier.

While it has been customary for players to shop in their own neighborhoods, there will now be neutral buildings that offer whatever else you may need (flour, napalm, and more). Your inner entrepre-

A chain reaction among the heroes.



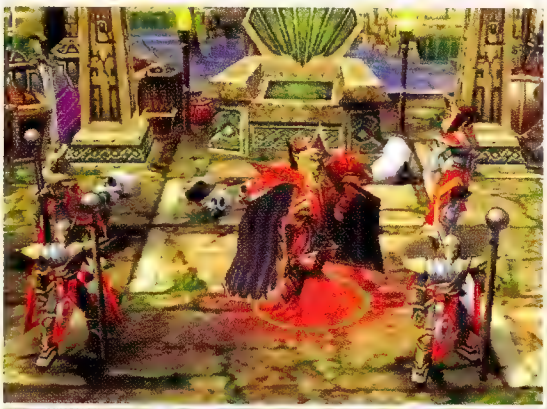


Flying units have come a long way since Orcs and Humans; They've replaced the usual trees of WarCraft III with lofty palms.

neur will now have a chance to build shops where you can sell swords, knives, etc.—whatever floats your race. And speaking of race, the missions in this expansion will be race-based, just like *WarCraft III*'s.

You might recall that hero units would generally be skewed to just "your side." There will now be "neutral heroes" that any side can recruit for its new spells and abilities. And if you have been modding *WarCraft* since *Orc vs. Humans*, then you'll be very interested to hear about the new editor that enables you to produce custom campaigns that use cutscenes and voiceovers. Those features can add real polish to your campaign design since now you can make a map that will "link" to other maps, giving you the ability to create storylines that require you to travel back and forth between areas, perhaps forcing players to watch cheesy (or not-so-cheesy) cutscene transitions.

A retail price of about $35 US may seem a bit steep for an add-on, but Blizzard realizes that it can command this type of investment from its loyal followers. We are talking about the company that produced superb expansions like *Brood War* for *StarCraft* and *Lord of Destruction* for *Diablo II*, so the chances are pretty good this one will be worthwhile. —*Cindy Yans*

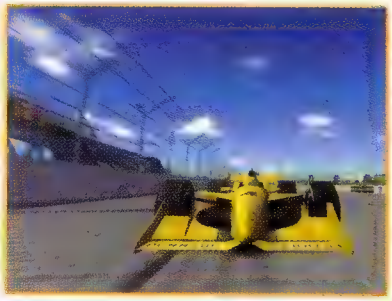


The mountain giant appears extremely determined; [left] A hero emotes among the Necromancers.

quick takes

DUNGEON LORDS

D.W. Bradley, creator and developer of *Wizardry V* through *VII*, is creating a real-time 3D full-freedom third-person perspective fantasy role-playing and action game. It offers a quest-filled world that brings you through an enchanted land of ancient castles and dungeon lairs to engage in real-time tactical combat action against a variety of deadly foes, from monstrous creatures to powerful wizards, to undead lords to greater demons. [Heuristic Park]



INDY RACING LEAGUE

This racing sim features the season's official cars, tracks, teams and drivers, totaling 14 tracks, 27 cars and 15 races, all presented in US television format. A fully authentic Indy 500 mode packages all the glitz with the IndyCar Series rules and flags, right down to a dynamic track surface in which track temperature affects tire grip. Vroom. [Codemasters]

CASINO MANAGER

This Tycoon-style game requires you to build, manage, and expand your empire by whatever means necessary. You can hire troublemakers to disrupt the competition, place public ads, and set up shuttle routes or limo services. 120 characters—hookers, hit men, and cheats included—will help you take a gamble on your skills as a casino manager. [Konami]

Rome: Total War

Developer **The Creative Assembly** Publisher **Activision**

Release Date **Early 2004**

"EPIC 3D BATTLES" has been the catch phrase for the *Total War* series since its initial game, *Shogun*, boasted such splendid visuals in 2000. Although *Medieval* upped the ante last year, it looks as though *Rome: Total War* might raise the bar once again with even more finely tuned graphics.

In *Rome*, you'll be the think-tank behind entire Roman Legions, Greek phalanxes, barbarian hordes, and the armies of Carthage, Egypt, and the Successor Kingdoms, each with its own unit mixture. Although there was some concern that developer The Creative Assembly would try to join today's majority and steer the entire game into real-time territory, it turns out that you can expect the tried-and-true turn-based strategic-level structure of the previous titles. "We think that turn-based is better for your high level strategic planning and organizing your resource management, building, training, diplomacy and general plotting," says Creative Director Michael De Plater. "It's really hard to have to manage all of this stuff in real-time without it turning into a rushed click-fest." In the Imperial Campaign (the largest map in the game) there are two turns per year, for your summertime and wintertime butchering pleasure. Some of the smaller campaigns, though, such as Caesar in Gaul, may have shorter turn structures.

The game starts around 270BC, just before the First Punic War, and ends around AD20, just after Augustus' reign as Emperor, covering Rome's major period of conquest and expansion from Italy as it fights against the Carthaginians, Greeks, and Barbarians. It also covers the transition from the Republic, through the Civil Wars with Julius Caesar and Pompey, and finally the establishment of the Empire with Augustus as Imperator. So you can frolic with Hannibal and his Elephants as they cross the Alps, witness the gladiator uprising of Spartacus, and leer as Caesar subdues the Gauls and Rome becomes a military super-power.

The 3D component applies not only to the tactical battles, but to the strategic maps themselves. "The elevations and terrain on the campaign map translate directly to the battle map terrain when you zoom down," says De Plater. "This means that if you position your army on the flank of a mountain on the campaign map, with a river running across the terrain, then when you zoom down to the battlefield this is exactly what you get." The developers also observed that the battles in *Rome* appear to run even faster than the ones in *Medieval*.

There will be multiplayer battles for up to eight-players, and the single-player campaign game also offers opposing playable factions—12 of them—including three Roman factions, Carthage, Macedonia, the Gauls, the Germans, and the Parthians.

Later this year, when this particular *Rome* burns, you'll then have the opportunity to say that they must really have had an awful lot of Gaul. —*Cindy Yans*

The editor is very flexible, so it's relatively easy to make new maps and new campaigns. [inset] The detailed topography makes long-range vision very effective.

Men of Valor: Vietnam

Developer **2015, Inc.** Publisher **Sierra** Release Date **2004**

Notice the detail of the used shell ejecting from the firing rifle.

WHEN THE WORLD first got a glimpse of *Medal of Honor: Allied Assault* in 2001, most folks were quite agog, and it was yet another obvious sign that action gaming has come a long way since the first *DOOM*. On *Medal of Honor's* first anniversary, developer 2015 and publisher Vivendi Universal announced that another historical first-person shooter is in the works. *Men of Valor: Vietnam* will burst onto the scene in 2004, dressed in yet another version of the ubiquitous *Unreal* engine. The central conflict will take place, not surprisingly, in the jungles of Southeast Asia and will center on infantry combat.

Missions will include search and destroy efforts around the Danang airbase to the Tet offensive and the counterattack on Hue. As in *Medal of Honor*, in the single player game you'll find yourself surrounded by AI characters that will "assist" you during combat, but the game will also offer a co-op mode as well as various other multiplayer modes. So you can play along with friends, or from the perspective of the North Vietnamese Army or the Viet Cong. And as Medal of Honor winner Forrest Gump once said, "There sure is a lot to do in Vietnam. —*Cindy Yans*

Thank goodness for a backup tank from the US Marine Corps; [right] A view from the other side.

quick takes

TEENAGE MUTANT NINJA TURTLES

Take on the role of your favorite mutant and hit the sewers in this resurrection of the classic 3D fighting-action series. Leonardo, Michelangelo, Donatello, and Raphael will use master ninja butt-kickin' abilities and hand-to-hand fighting skills as they approach the Shinto temple of their legendary foe, The Shredder. [Konami]

HEROES OF MIGHT AND MAGIC IV: WINDS OF WAR

The second expansion pack for the fourth episode of the long-lived, turn-based strategy will offer 40 maps and six new campaigns, including some prize-winning mods. This particular campaign takes place in Channon, a large kingdom on Axeoth's northern continent, and it's up to you to assume control of the five invading terrorists. [3DO]

PIRATES OF THE BURNING SEA

Flying Labs has moved from *Rail Across America* to the Caribbean of the 18th Century. This massively multiplayer online role-playing game spurns the usual fantasy world, and will bring plenty of swashbuckle to the table. Using Valve's Steam technology, it will require broadband and be optimized for high-end systems. [Flying Labs]

Courtesans awaiting their many Spanish customers; [right] Some pirates fresh off the boat and looking forward to their shore leave.

Tropico 2: Pirate Cove

Developer **Frog City** Publisher **Take2 Interactive**
Release Date **April 2003**

THE FOLLOW-UP to *Tropico*, this time with developer Frog City taking over from PopTop Software [for more on its development, see page 94], rewinds time a few hundred years from the banana republics of the Caribbean to pirates of the Caribbean. You probably already knew that. But did you know that...

1) ...dead men tell no tales, but they can still haul lumber? Since pirates don't breed like the citizens of Tropico, your main source of new labor is the captives you bring back from raiding settlements. However, when you start a game, there are options that provide extra manpower at the price of reducing your final score. Among the options is "Skeleton Island," which gives you a graveyard that occasionally provides undead laborers.

2) ...*Ally McBeal* has nothing on *Tropico 2*? When a pirate comes back from a long cruise, he needs to spend time ashore to fill the needs that will boost his overall happiness and make him an efficient crew member. Or her, in some cases. There are women pirates whose needs include wenching along with the usual feasting, gambling, and drinking. For instance, in Miss Brittany Dodd's thought box, you'll see comments like "I need some wenches." No word as to what effect this will have on the ESRB rating.

3) ...fear will keep them in line? Each part of your island is rated for security, anarchy, order, and fear. These qualities emanate from different structures. For instance, a cheap anchor decoration generates a little bit of security. The costly cannons generate more security. And the prohibitively expensive fort (which requires the capture of a skilled engineer before you can build it) generates a whole lot of security. As a pirate passes through areas with lots of security, his security rating bar fills up and gives his overall happiness a boost. So it's in your best interest to make sure that areas frequented by pirates have a high level of security. Pirates also like anarchy, whereas captives work best and are less likely to escape when they're in areas with lots of order and fear, respectively. You can place decorations like skeletons, dismembered arms, gallows, skull topiaries, and lynching trees to keep your captives in line and your pirates happy.

4) ...all roads lead to the dock? In the first *Tropico*, roads were largely cosmetic. Although they had an effect on travel speed, the little citizens ignored them. But in *Tropico 2*, pirates and captives can't travel off road. A building can't be placed unless it's connected to a road. This means you have more control over how your people get around and you have to plan your

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A well-fed pirate on his way to satisfy other pirate-ly urges.

road network carefully. When pirates return from a cruise, you'll want to make sure they have a direct route home and then to the places they'll want to go to refill their needs bars before heading back out to sea.

5) ...even pirates can be international sell-outs? There's a strategic map of the Caribbean divided into fourteen zones. Each of your ships has a marker you can drag into a zone to specify it's destination. As your ships raid these zones, your knowledge increases and you get more information about them. For instance, the Virgin Islands might be only lightly patrolled, with a Spanish farmstead and an English trade route. You decide which targets your pirates will attack, which determines how each nationality feels about you. You can also affect your standing with edicts that release all captives of a certain nationality, or orders to your ships to ignore all targets from a certain nation. Eventually, you can cozy up to one of the nationalities and ask them to be your patron, which will protect you from invasion.

6) ...one leg is better than two? You can create accessories and give them to individual pirates. A pirate with a parrot fights better, a pirate with a hat is a better officer on a ship, and a pirate with a peg leg will recruit more pirates and take more captives. Eye patches, however, don't do anyone any good.

7) ...pirates love fruit tarts? Corn is used for beer, sugarcane is used for rum, bananas and papayas are used for pastries, and tobacco is rolled into cigars. These processed goods make your pirates happier faster, so they can get back out to sea sooner. You can also sell them from a smuggler's cove to make money.

8) ..."the English are inveterate gamblers and drinkers"? So says *Tropico 2's* island log. Each nationality provides captives and pirates with a bent towards certain skills and needs. As the log tells us, "The Spanish, of course, love the ladies." When you Brits put down your dice and beer, you can address all angry correspondence to Frog City.

You didn't, did you? —*Tom Chick*

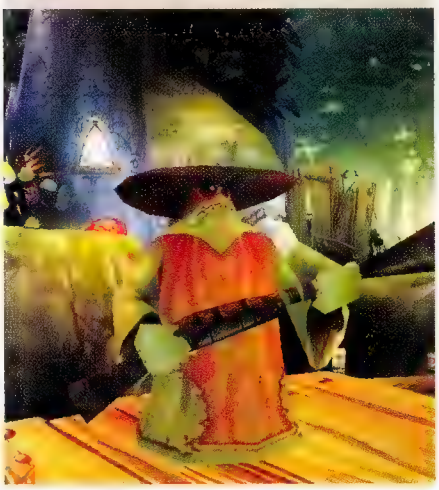
Rayman 3 Hoodlum Havoc

Developer/Publisher **UbiSoft** Release Date **Spring 2003**

NOTHING EVER WAS quite "right" in Rayman's universe, but now, the Dark Lum Lord has begun his reign of havoc. The word in the gang-world is that a single Red Lum was touched by something so intensely terrible that it grew dark with evil. It then formed an army of Cloaked Lums, and yes, it's up to Rayman-of-the-invisi-limb to stop them.

Rayman 3 Hoodlum Havoc adds many new moves to our hero's arsenal such as The Shock Rocket, Heavy Metal Fist, and Lock Jaw. Ubi Soft's H.A.V.O.C. (Hoodlum Activity Vector Orientation Control) brings adaptive AI to each individual situation. Gameplay is all about *Rayman*, as he leaps through environments battling over 20 different enemies. Luckily he has his friend Globox, whose exclusive Flatulence Action Rapid Transport (F.A.R.T.) and Belching Action Rapid Flight (B.A.R.F.) systems come to the rescue. Gas rules. Everybody loves Rayman, and here he comes again, late this March. —*Cindy Yans*

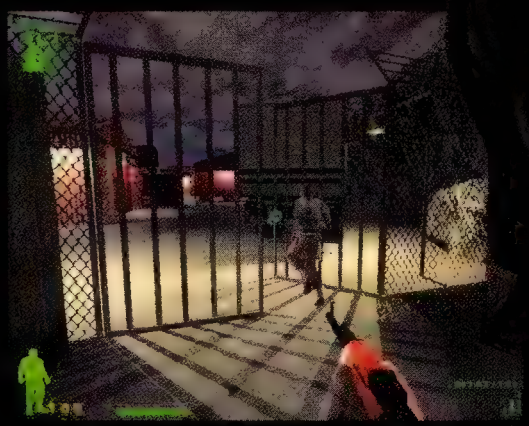
Absolutely splendiferous landscapes abound.



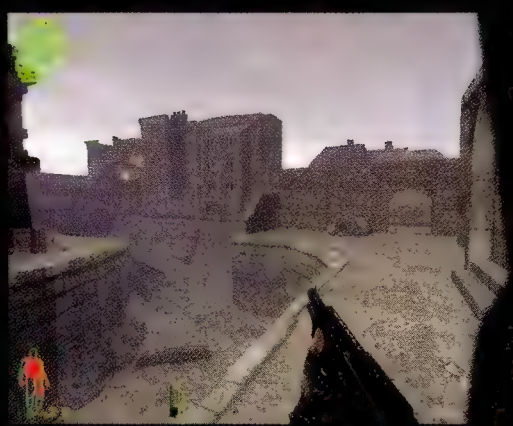
The hoodlum guard will never know what hit him. Neither will you.

TERRORISM DOESN'T STAND A CHANCE

3 levels of difficulty challenge beginners to hardcore gamers



Super realistic, tactical team-based first-person shooter in singleplayer or multiplayer mode



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MATURE M CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

Violence
Blood

Uru: Online Ages Beyond MYST

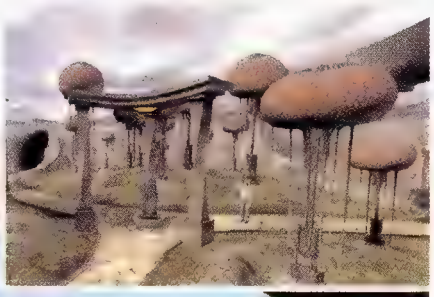
Developer **Cyan Worlds** Publisher **Ubi Soft** Release Date **2003**

THE BROTHERS MILLER of Cyan brought *MYST* into the world in 1994, and it has been the source of so much derivation ever since. Robyn Miller jumped ship somewhere amongst the sequels, but brother Rand stayed true to the property and founded Cyan Worlds. What was called, until only recently, an online game codenamed "Mudpie" has finally emerged as *Uru: Online Ages Beyond MYST*. It went into closed beta testing in January, 2003. We spent one-and-a-half days playing the beta but were summarily booted when they discovered we were members of the press. In violation of our oath to say nothing at all about it, there is one thing we have to share. The online world is very...*MYST*-like. That is to say, you'll know you're in D'ni.

Cyan Worlds provides various Ages to explore, including Personal Ages, which are islands and houses where explorers begin their adventures. This is not a massively multiplayer online game such as *EverQuest* and friends. You will create a custom avatar that is simply "you," and as in the first game, you'll be thrust into a land with no possessions, no information, no clue. It will invite you to explore, solve puzzles, play games, and engage in other activities, with content that is always evolving. "Uru explorers will find that the world changes every day," says creator Rand Miller. "These daily changes may be small or large, but every month or so, entire ages will appear."

Perhaps the most interesting news available at this point is that it claims it will be the first title to fully support real-time in-game voice communication. After over five years in development, it seems about time to let all of its fans become guerillas in the *MYST*. —*Cindy Yans*

1503 AD: Because every tropical island needs its own medieval castle.



URU: D'ni is still a lonely world; [right] What are those tendrils on those, uh, mushrooms? Do I swing on them?

1503 AD

Developer **Sunflowers** Publisher **Electronic Arts** Release Date **March 2003**

IN THE SIXTEENTH and seventeenth centuries, the Germans missed out on all that overseas exploration and colonization. Coastal powers like England, the Netherlands, Spain, and Portugal had all the fun while Germany stayed home and played with its neighbors. That might explain why colony-building games like Sunflower's *1602 A.D.* are so successful there—of the 2.5 million copies sold worldwide, over a third were purchased in Germany.

With the sequel/prequel, *1503 A.D.*, Sunflower is hoping to expand the series' appeal to American gamers. Funatics' *Cultures*, which is similar to *1602 A.D.*, made a similar attempt in its sequel by including *Sims*-like role-playing elements, whereby each citizen had skills and needs. Sunflowers is skewing more to real-time strategy gamers by fleshing out the military elements. By constructing schools and universities, you'll amass knowledge, which is spent unlocking units and improvements on a tech tree. Once you

have your military built, *1503 A.D.* features standard conventions like control groups, formations, patrols, and aggression settings. You can research flaming arrows to damage buildings, explosive mortar shells to wreak havoc on infantry, and medics to heal your armies after a battle.

1503 A.D. will also add new climates, each with its own unique resources and AI-controlled civilizations. Each land mass will have optimal crops to encourage overseas colonies and trade routes. The spices and gems you'll find in tropical regions will fetch a higher price on polar islands. You can conquer or trade with the Eskimos, Moors, and Native Americans. The Venetians will be included as a neutral AI civilization that sends ships around to fulfill trade requests, while the pirates will be included as a hostile civilization that tries to plunder helpless ships. For the right price, you can bribe pirates to leave you alone and pick on someone else.

1503 A.D. was released in Germany last November to what Sunflower claims were record sales figures for that market. We'll see how they fare with American gamers later this spring. *–Tom Chick*

1503 AD: Now with more war than before!

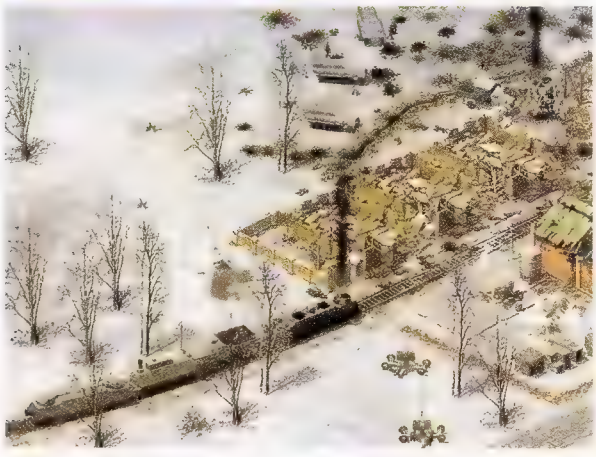
Blitzkrieg

Developer **Nival** Publisher **CDV** Release Date **Q2 2003**

There's a high level of gritty realism to the game's visuals, but units can be hard to see. [right] You can call in as many air strikes as you'd like, with certain time-based limitations, but you'd better make sure to take out any anti-aircraft weapons in the area first.

THE CONTINUING INFLUX of WWII games continues unabated with CDV's *Blitzkrieg*, a WWII real-time strategy game developed by Moscow-based Nival Interactive. It features three historical campaigns that let you command German, Soviet, or Allied troops in the years 1939-1945. Different parts of the campaign are set in Africa, Siberia, and Europe, allowing the standard desert, snow, and forest terrains. Their structure is unusual, with a linear campaign that features optional randomly generated missions. Why take on the optional missions? Your units accumulate experience during combat, and you get to carry that over from mission to mission. Each starts with a minimum compliment of troops, so you'll never get behind if you're not particularly successful on some of the random missions, but it's in your best interest to do as many as possible to get the best troops out there in battle.

It looks good, with realistic-looking terrain and a combination of 3D vehicle units and 2D infantry (you'll have plenty of each on screen at any given time), though it's sometimes difficult to see units as they blend into the background. Its detail is wargame-like in the sense you need to establish supply lines to keep your units stocked with weapons and ammo, you can dig trenches, build bridges, call in air strikes, capture and re-use enemy artillery, and the game models different armor values for each side of every vehicle.



BLITZKRIEG: You can even use trains as part of your supply line.

As with many Russian-developed games, there's clearly no shortage of… stuff: more than 150 types of vehicles and machinery, 40 kinds of infantry per side, over 250 buildings and objects, destructible environments, videos that set up each mission, large detailed maps, unit and map editors with open file formats… the list goes on and on. As with many Russian-developed games, including Nival's own (*Evil Islands*, *Etherlords*, *Rage of Mages*), having all that… stuff is no guarantee it will all hold together. "We want the AI to pose a challenge, no matter what the size or skill level of your force," says Mike Allenson of Nival, and making the combination of quantity of units, random missions, and experience points work properly requires a lot of play testing to get the balance right. *–Steve Bauman*

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TRON

Bob Picunko has put together a presentation for Disney to demonstrate recent instances of TRON in popular culture. Picunko is Disney Interactive's director of marketing and he's trying to demonstrate that TRON is still a recognizable brand. He has dug up a Shania Twain lightcycle video, a video from an English boy band too young to have seen the movie when it was released, and a Sci-Fi Channel promo with Tony Hawk on his skateboard competing in the lightcycle arena. Picunko hasn't included the Simpson's episode when Homer goes into a 3D cyberspace and is asked what it's like in there...

OOTED

THE INFAMOUS SCI-FI MOVIE MAKES A STRANGE JOURNEY TO YOUR COMPUTER IN MONOLITH'S **TRON 2.0**

By Tom Chick

"Did anyone see that movie, *TRON*?" Homer asks.

After a chorus of "No's," someone replies "Yes," and then changes his answer to "No" to avoid sounding like a big, fat dorky geek. The point? *TRON* isn't cool these days. It's old hat. It's dated. This is your father's movie about computer games. It bombed at the box office when it opened in 1982 and it hasn't held up very well under the weight of twenty years. So why on earth would Monolith, creator of the acclaimed *No One Lives Forever* series, be making a big budget first-person shooter based on a movie that flopped two decades ago?

A Slight Damper

In the early 80s, Disney was trying to break out of its stereotype as an old-fashioned studio that only made kiddie movies. *Jaws* and *Star Wars* had demonstrated the earning potential for visual effects movies. Its first attempt to cash in on this was *The Black Hole*, which was also its first PG-rated movie. When it flopped in 1979, Disney tried to bounce back with *TRON*, which they hoped might succeed based in part on the popularity of video arcades.

Unfortunately, it also flopped when it was released in 1982. It opened against *E.T.*, which cast a long dark shadow over every other movie aimed at young boys. Consider too, that *TRON* came out the same year as memorable movies that still hold up, like *The Road Warrior*, *Blade Runner*, *Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan*, and *Conan the Barbarian*. *TRON* had failed. In fact, the videogame, which was developed simultaneously with the movie, made more money at the arcades than the movie made at the box office. "For a while it put a slight damper on the idea of making movies with computers," says Richard Taylor, *TRON's* visual effects supervisor.

Although it wouldn't be apparent until later, *TRON* did have

a significant impact on a specific group of people. It may not have resonated very far and wide, but it resonated powerfully with people interested in video games and computer technology; in other words, the kind of people who would go on to play, and make, computer games. If you're over thirty, odds are that you're already looking forward to *TRON 2.0*. And if you're under thirty, the unique setting and design makes it stand out in the crowded 3D action genre.

Deviant Behaviors

Corruption is a dynamic unique to *TRON 2.0*. The backstory supposes that the digitization technology that transported Jeff Bridges' character, Kevin Flynn, from the real world into the computer was lost after the movie's villain, the Master Control Program, was defeated 20 years ago. Ever since then, Alan Bradley, played by Bruce Boxleitner in the movie, has been trying to recover it. Emcon's head of security, J.D. Thorn, manages to steal an early iteration of the technology to try to sell it to a competitor. To prove its effectiveness, Thorn uses it on himself. However, without a particular algorithm to which only Bradley is privy, the digitization will corrupt its subject, driving him mad.

So when *TRON 2.0* begins, Thorn has been trapped inside the lab server as corrupted data. He's gradually taking over the other programs to create a following in the *TRON* world, like an analogue to *Heart of Darkness'* Colonel Kurtz. When you fight one of Thorn's corrupted programs, its attacks can infect some of your active subroutines, causing them to work at reduced effectiveness and perhaps even spread their corruption to adjacent subroutines. If a subroutine is corrupted badly enough, it can even have what Monolith calls "deviant behavior." You can also find subroutines that are already corrupted which, without virus a scanner, might unwittingly infect your other subroutines.

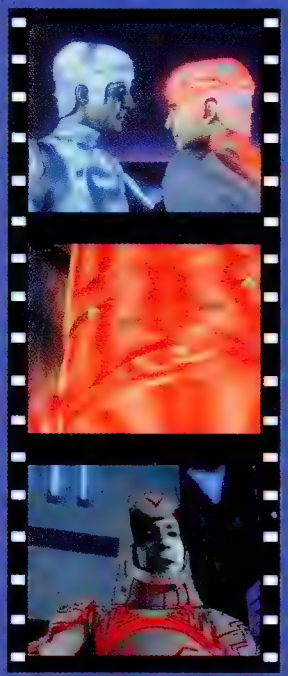
Whereas you can usually swap subroutines in and out instantly, there are three "procedural subroutines" that are always available, though they take time to run in the background. One of them is disinfecting, which cleans corrupted subroutines. Another is porting, which translates foreign subroutines from other systems to a familiar language so you can use them. And the third is defragging, which can free up additional memory in a system for extra subroutines.

As you accomplish objectives and finds bonuses, you can increase your health, energy, weapon efficiency (which determines how much energy is used as ammo), processor (which determines how fast procedural subroutines work), and transfer speed, which determines how quickly you can download from archive bins. The amount you've upgraded your stats determines your version number, which is *TRON 2.0*'s equivalent of "level" in a role-playing game.

Archive bins are *TRON's* version of crates. "I refused to put

SCI-FI AHEAD OF SCHEDULE

The original movie was curiously bad but way ahead of its time



YOU CAN WATCH A DIGITALLY remastered version of *TRON* thanks to Disney's 20th anniversary DVD. But brace yourself. It's bad in a way that most movies that get a 20th anniversary re-releases aren't. The storyline is contrived and inconsistent. There are underdeveloped metaphysical and political themes shoved off into the margins to make room for some limp stabs at humor. Jeff Bridges gives it 110%, even when it's not working, especially when it's not working, making lame jokes and even gamely prancing through a shirtless beefcake scene after working up a sweat in the local videogame arcade. Then there's the really bad dialogue like Cindy Morgan's "They haven't built a circuit that could hold you," and Barnard Hughes' "Video warriors, look at the IO Towers." It doesn't help that the dated graphics have lost their sense of "Wow, look at that!" Wendy Carlos' soundtrack is the epitome of all those synthesizers used to score movies in the 80s. The whole thing is capped off with Steve Perry howling some forgotten Journey song written for the movie. Ouch.

Steven Lisberger originally created the character of TRON as a tech demo for his animation studio in Boston. A warrior lined in blue hurled a frisbee at the screen. It was very rocking in a late 70s/early 80s kind of way. When Lisberger came to Hollywood and was able to get backing from Disney to turn that into a movie, he was teamed with Alan Kay, an early pioneer in computer technology, and Kay's wife, Bonnie MacBird. MacBird recalls the original script had more humor and more character development. But, the little sidekick to Bridges' character, wanted to be a full program. TRON wanted to become human. Jeff Bridges' Flynn was a sort of Dorothy in Oz who just wanted to get home. Also, Kay had built into the script more technical information about how a computer might work and what could go wrong.

"Early on," MacBird says, "Alan suggested I study Robert Heinlein's novels for his pre-

Shooting programs within the gameworld turns them into data.

ation of alternate worlds and his very human characters set adrift in those worlds. All efforts in that direction seemed lost in the final film. Alan was so disappointed in the whole science part being trashed that he took his name off as technical consultant." A lengthy mediation with the Writers Guild of America followed, along with eight rewrites at Disney. In the end, Lisberger is credited with the script and he shares credit with MacBird for the story. Kay's name doesn't appear anywhere in the credits.

TRON was set in cyberspace before anyone had even started using the word. "It is the first film set in that type of space," says Richard Taylor, *TRON's* visual effects supervisor. "We were creating a new fantasy world that had no limits, something no one had every seen before." With the rise of the Internet, computers, and cyberpunk, it sounds commonplace today. But computers weren't a part of everyday life twenty years ago. No one had e-mail. There was no World Wide Web. Concepts like hackers, user IDs, and computer programs were technobabble to the average person.

Although it's a cliché, it is true that the movie *TRON* was ahead of its time. "I'm sure back then, the Disney folks counting the box office receipts were wishing it wasn't so far ahead of its time," laughs *TRON's* visual consultant Syd Mead. "It was very prescient. Science usually catches up with dreams. In fact, I call science fiction 'reality ahead of schedule,' which is a good description of *TRON*."

any actual crates in here," says lead design Frank Rooke, all but pounding his fist on the table. An archive bin is a clear box with data floating around in it. When you walk up to it, you're presented with a list of what's in it and how much energy you'll have to spend to get each item out. Once you've selected something, the amount of time it takes to download depends on your character's transfer rate.

Decidedly More Testosterone

"You won't find any floating weapons in here," says Rooke, who was previously one of the level designers on *No One Lives Forever*. He's explaining how the weapons are part of their system of subroutines.

Each level in *TRON 2.0* takes place inside a computer system. Different computer systems give your character a different set of slots, representing system memory, for subroutines. The lab mainframe, where the game begins, has a lot of room consisting of contiguous slots. A Palm Pilot type PDA might have plenty of slots, but they won't be contiguous. And an older system, like the Emcon server where the original movie took place (yes, you will go there and revisit the twenty-year-old graphics from the movie), might have very few slots available.

Subroutines come in three versions: alphas take three slots, betas take two slots, and golds take only one slot. Furthermore, each version works more efficiently than the previous one. In the different systems, you can find little

As you can see here, Monolith's visuals are certainly faithful to the movie—in fact, they look better than the movie. You have the "Discs of Tron" for gladiator-style battles, the legendary lightcycles, and the bottom shot shows how you can deflect attacks with the disc.

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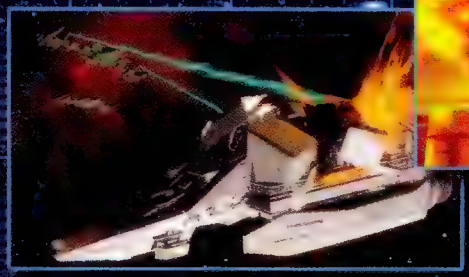

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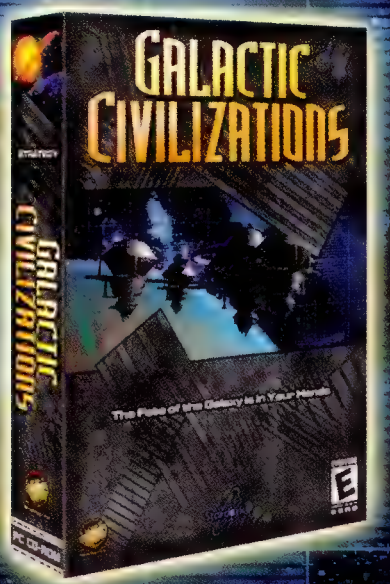

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INFOGRAMES

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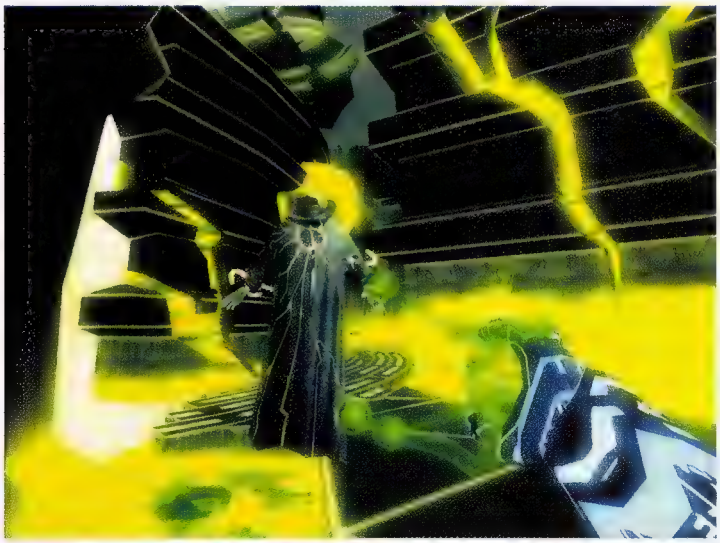
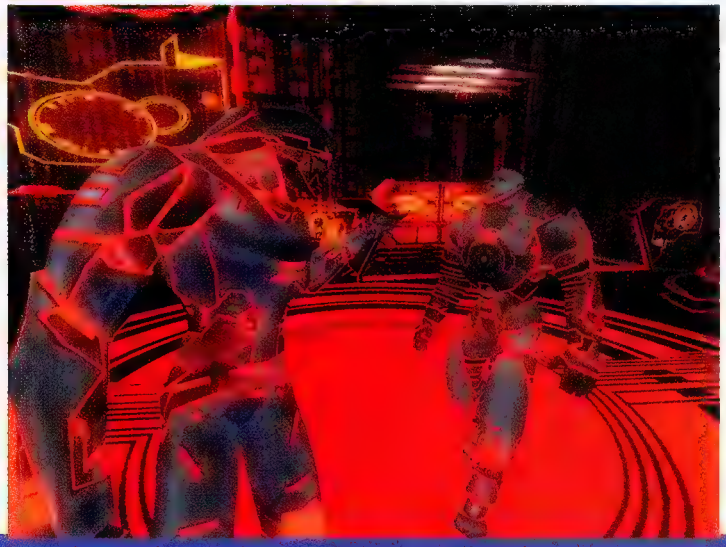
The environments throughout look like nothing else in gaming today. Everything has that unique TRON glow, all based around primary colors.





robots called optimizers that will upgrade one subroutine one level.

There are three kinds of subroutines. Defense subroutines represent different types and amounts of armor. You can activate a helmet, pants, sleeves, a vest, boots, and a viral shield to protect you from special attack that can corrupt your subroutines. "We're taking people out of spandex and putting them in body armor," says Monolith CEO Jason Hall, "There's decidedly more testosterone in this iteration of *TRON*."

Weapon subroutines are essentially weapons. Your character will gather the four "primitives," which are the basis for the game's weapons. There's a disk, ball, rod, and mesh primitive, each with a basic attack. But as you acquire subroutines, you can activate them, system memory permitting, to upgrade the primitive to a new weapon.

For instance, the rod primitive is a basic melee weapon that can short out enemies. If you find a subroutine called Suffusion, you can put it into one of your slots to turn the rod primitive into the equivalent of a shotgun. If you find a subroutine called LOL, you can put it into one of your slots to turn the rod primitive into the equivalent of a sniper rifle. With four primitives, each with a base form and two weapon subroutines, *TRON 2.0* has twelve different weapons.

Finally, there are utility subroutines. Fuzzy Signature gives you stealth capability, Shield Prism lets you convert enemy attacks into energy, Megahertz and Corrode add extra damage to your attack, Primitive Charge increases the damage of each weapon's base form, Triangulate gives you binoculars, Y-amp increases your jumping height, Profiler reveals information about an enemy's health and inventory, and Virus Scan warns you when your subroutines are corrupted and repairs them.

With the limited slots for all these subroutines, you'll have

TRON II, TOO

Can games create demand for movie sequels? Disney may find out

IT'S OFFICIAL. THERE IS A *TRON* movie sequel in development at Disney. Right now, it's in the script development phase, which means there's no guarantee it'll ever see the light of the silver screen, but it's a very real project. The director and writer of the original TRON, Steven Lisberger, has been working with Disney as a producer and as a contributor to the early drafts of the script.

"Typically, we wouldn't be as excited about a movie that performed as small as *TRON* did," explains Disney vice president of (film) production Brigham Taylor, "but in this case we feel it's finally come of age." (The original *TRON* grossed a little over $30 million at the box office, and it had an at-the-time large budget of $17 million.) He says the studio was emboldened a few years ago when Disney's flagship theatre, the El Capitan on Hollywood Boulevard, had a limited release of the original movie. "It was packed. Sold out. That generated a lot of interest. That happened right around the time Steve [Lisberger] came back in the office and was talking about going back in. I think he'd been in before and hadn't found enough enthusiasm, but it converged at that time and we figured we'd jump back in." Taylor

to make hard choices. The gameplay pauses when you take subroutines from your library and puts them into memory slots to activate them. "You can change subroutines at any time," says Rooke. "If you come across a situation that requires a more defensive approach, you can change your subroutines instantly. Or if you're into sniping. Or if you want to sneak by someone. We want you to be able to play the way you want to play without having to commit to just one style."

The Same Feel

One of Monolith's greatest challenges is taking familiar elements from the original movie and arcade games, like the disc and lightcycle, and building them into the game. The designers wanted the disc to be something you would use throughout the game, even after you got more powerful weapons, like the lightsaber in *Jedi Knight II*.

So they've built a lot of new functions into it. A simple left click flings the disc out. It comes back to you like a boomerang after it's hit something or after you've hit the recall key. It has limited homing ability, but by holding down the left mouse button after you've thrown it, you can guide its flight to represent putting English into your throw.

You can also use the disc to block attacks. A well-timed block can be turned into a powerful deflecting counterattack. A disc duel can be a strategic dance of trying to angle the disc around to hit your opponent from behind to spoof his blocks. But, of course, after you've thrown the disc, you can't block with it. As with the other primitives, subroutines can upgrade the disc into an explosive attack or a multi-disc spread. Then there are all the nifty little idle animations.

The lightcycles are a whole other matter. Lightcycle matches basically used the same mechanics of that snake game you may as well play on your cell phone. How do you make that compelling? Rooke takes a deep breath like he doesn't know where to start. "Well, different cycles are rated for things like acceleration, top speed, how much speed they lose when they turn, things like that. And the player has control over his brakes and his speed. You can hug the wall for a speed boost. There are powerups that you can drive your cycle over to get a shield brake, superboost, and a turbo curse that makes everyone else's bike go at super turbo speed. There's a powerup that causes wall obstacles to pop up behind you. We have things that you'd expect from a cool racing game, but it's all based on the core idea of turning at right angles and trying to cut people off."

Rooke demonstrates, using his mouse to control the camera and the cursor keys to control the lightcycle. "We have the zoom control on the mouse wheel. You can view it from close in or you can go way out and get the 2D effect looking down on the whole grid. There's a first-person mode, too." Now he's peering over the hood of the bike, using the mouse to mouselook while a red cycle pulls up beside him. With a few quick cuts, he's boxed the red cycle in. The rider yells in frustration before plowing into the trail of Rooke's bike.

"It's the same mechanics, it's got the same feel, but it's pumped up with the graphics, with better control. It's got the powerups. We're exploring some environmental hazards like force fields and tanks on the grid shooting at you. It's really fast-paced, and it's all about making split second decisions."

Where's the Deathmatch?

"We really strove to have a multiplayer component that wasn't just deathmatch, with people running around in colorful environments with *TRON* weapons," says Rooke. "We thought let's design a particular thing for *TRON*. People will either go, 'Damn it, where's the deathmatch?' or, 'That was cool, it's totally *TRON*, I remember playing the arcade game and it's 3D now.'"

Multiplayer games will be based on the idea of gladiatorial

admits that the success of *The Matrix* has indirectly contributed by demonstrating that "the sci-fi action adventure genre is alive and well."

When asked how the script might relate to the game, Taylor says they're taking different paths but have some convergence. "[The game's] character is Alan Bradley's son," he says. "We open on a character who's not related but had a relationship, both with Bradley, but more importantly with Flynn [Jeff Bridges' character]. And he now is working for a new incarnation of the company and we follow his journey inside the computer." He thinks both storylines can coexist despite any differences. "We've stayed in touch so we don't step on each other's toes and so we're not inconsistent with each other."

In fact, Taylor hopes the game and movie might complement each other. "This is a situation where [Disney] Interactive is really helping to fuel our creative energy. I think it could be very influential on the kinds of things that would wind up in a movie if we get it produced. Once we get our story and characters right, I think we will go back at the end of the day to see where we can cleverly plug in some of their new additions." He feels they'll definitely want to look at the weaponry and environments, but he doesn't want them to just replicate the game. [We want to] take [the game] as a cue and go somewhere else with it. We want to make sure it all feels like it's taking part in the same universe.

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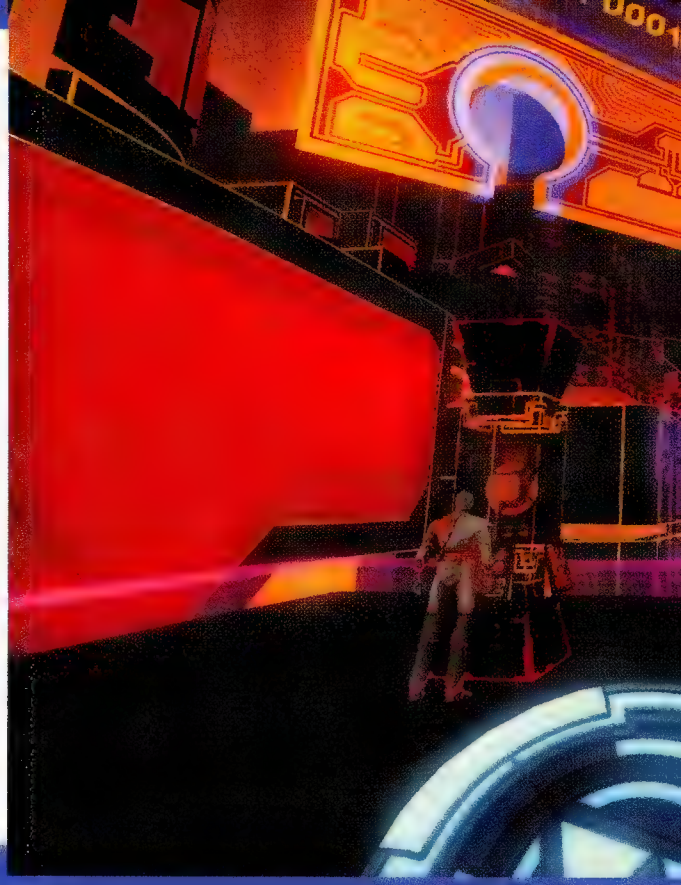
combat. A multiplayer level will have a set of arenas that people can enter to square off against other players. In the middle is a spectator area where you can study potential opponents or just hang out to watch. The objective on a server is to be the guy with the most points on the leaderboard. There are different levels based on environments from the single player game: a corrupted server, an Internet city, the old *TRON* world, and even the disappearing rings arenas from the arcade game.

The big question right now is whether they'll be able to get the lightcycles to work in multiplayer games. "Believe me, everybody on the team, everybody at Disney, everybody we've ever talked to wants multiplayer lightcycle," Rooke says. "We're trying to find a way to do it, but there are a lot of issues with lag, control, the timing, and the speed you have with lightcycles. Maybe it'll be reduced to a LAN version only. We'd really like to have that, but there are just so many issues."

The Big Why

"When you go out there and talk to gamers and people in the industry," Richard Taylor says, "you see that it's filled with people who saw *TRON* and that's why they do what they do.



"ICONIC RE-STROKES"

Legendary designer Syd Mead on creating lightcycles and artificial illusions

FROM THE OUTSIDE, SYD Mead's house isn't particularly flashy. It's flat with lots of right angles. There's a small pickup truck in the driveway and a little Japanese garden near the front door. There's a definite absence of the sort of sleek, dark shapes that characterize the person whose design vision helped shape the look of the most influential science-fiction movie of the last 20 years, *Blade Runner*.

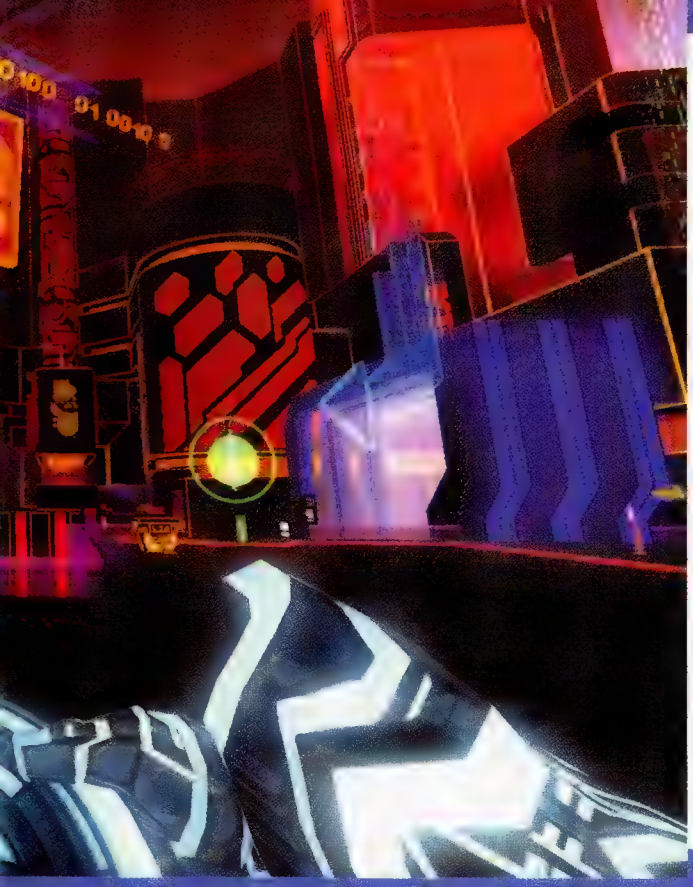
But once inside, you'll find long glass shelves with a hundred model cars from the past, present, and future. One wall is covered with a huge mural of a futuristic landscape. There are models near the doorway of Mead's spinner from *Blade Runner* and his lightcycle from *TRON*. "I'd say those are the two movies I'm best known for," he says.

Mead's title varies by project, but he's most often credited as a visual consultant (his "visual futurist" credit for *Blade Runner* was an idea he came up with while he was on the phone with his lawyer). Unlike a production designer, who works during a film shoot to create the set, Mead collaborates closely with the director during the early conceptual stages of a movie.

Before his debut in the movie industry as a visual consultant for the first *Star Trek* movie, he worked at Ford, which partly explains the fascination with cars. "Whether I'm working on a movie or a game, I don't treat it any differently from a company that makes

radios or clocks or cars," he says. "Movies, and now games more and more, are describing worlds that need the same stuff that our world has. They need furniture, they need vehicles, they need costumes. For me, it's all the same."

Although his contributions to *TRON* ranged from some of the settings and vehicle interiors to the font used for the logo, he began working with director Steven Lisberger on a particular task. "We needed three vehicles: a tank, an aircraft car-



The world of TRON is like a giant city. It's full of both friendly characters as well as corrupted programs.

Not necessarily because they liked the film so much, but because they went, 'hey, wait a minute, you mean those pictures were made with a computer?'"

Jason Hall is one of the people Taylor is talking about. He remembers the opening of the movie with a childlike glee. "They show the guy playing an arcade game with the lightcycle and then it goes into the screen and you see the actual cycle. I remember thinking as a kid, 'Man, if videogames could only look like that...ohmygod, ohmygod!' I remember coming out of the movie and wanting one of those Frisbees. I grew up in Los Angeles so we used to go the beach a lot with Frisbees and we'd play *TRON*. And then the video game came out. All that helped influence and inspire people like me to want to be more involved in games, to explore building things."

Pixar's John Lasseter, who has said there would be no *Toy Story* without *TRON*, has called *TRON* the perfect marriage of technology and subject matter. The same could be said of a *TRON* game. "We find ourselves making a game about a movie about making a game," says Picunko.

"There's a lot you can play with from a game perspective," says Monolith's Hall. "*TRON* has less conventional thinking in

ner, and lightcycle. We had to make them instantly recognizable, but they also had to be totally new. For instance, you recognize an aircraft carrier instantly because it has a flat surface and a superstructure off to the side. Well, that's the key. I figured what I'd do is have two flat surfaces, at right angles, and put this tower off to the side, because you can have stuff in space with a different 3D relationship."

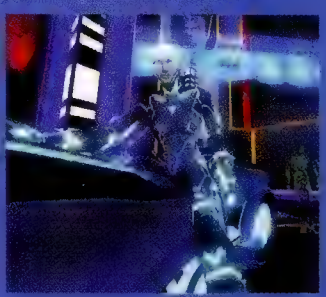
"It was the same idea with the tank. There are the tracks and the turret in profile. When I was playing with the graphics, I just moved the gun off center. When the turret swings around, when it's in motion, it looks much more interesting off center like that. What I did was to manufacture an instantly recognizable iconic re-stroke on a very familiar object."

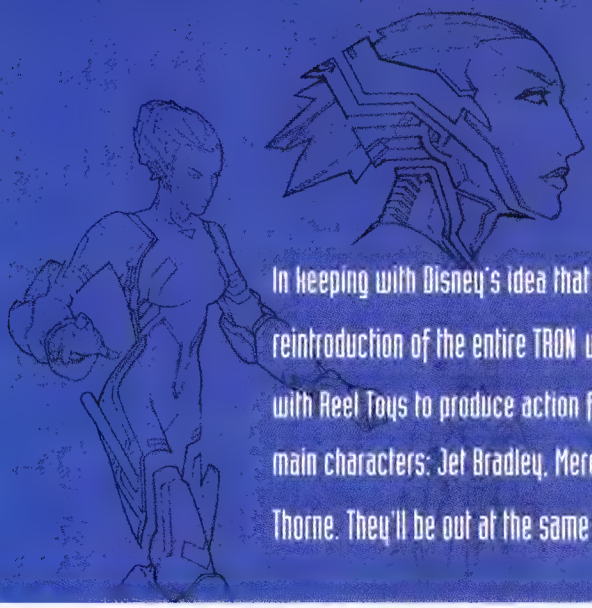
Mead has worked on three computer games: a Japanese project that was never completed, an old NovaLogic game called *CyberRace*, and *Wing Commander: Prophecy*, the last in the series, for which he designed the alien ships. "Actually, I've never seen how that one turned out, because the game was PC based. I'm Macintosh."

TRON 2.0 will be his fourth game and an opportunity to revisit the world he helped create twenty years ago. Disney Interactive contracted him for an updated design of his original lightcycle. "I tried to capture the feel of this muscular visceral machine, but make it geometrically simple. The original idea of all the machines in *TRON* was to make them look like solid three-dimensional graphics. That was my style key. So when I redesigned the lightcycle, I tried to retain the simple geometry."

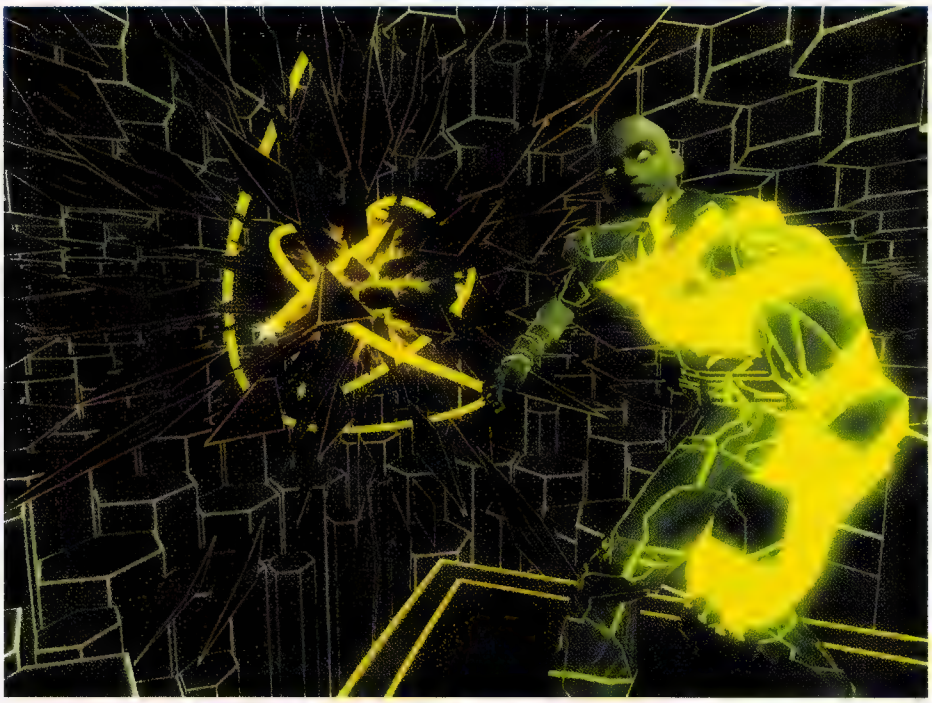
Mead does away with the solid carapace that covered the rider in the movie, since its main reason for being there was to keep the computer from having to render a complex human figure, a task too daunting for the hardware twenty years ago. The new cycle is slung low and stretched out, like a Harley Davidson with its front wheel thrust way forward. This front wheel, which is connected to the main body by translucent electronic *TRON*-stuff, was the key to Mead's design.

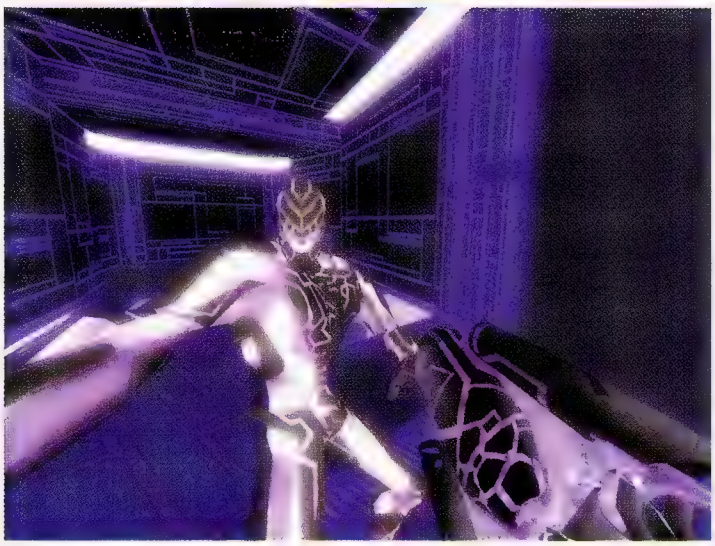
"The limitations in a world like *TRON* nowadays are that with computers able to duplicate reality, you just can't tell anymore. The last few episodes of *Star Wars*, you couldn't tell whether it was real scenery or composited. So the challenge is that if we can do reality absolutely 100% undetectable, how do you know it's still artificial? You have to reintroduce some kind of visual cue that let's you know it's not reality. You have to introduce something that jars the reality vector of the illusion. The floating front wheel would be part of that, to remind you that this is an electronically created illusion."





In keeping with Disney's idea that the game is serving as a reintroduction of the entire TRON universe, it's contracted with Reel Toys to produce action figures for four of the main characters: Jet Bradley, Mercury, IC Regular, and Thorne. They'll be out at the same time as the game.





Given the license, and minus the constraints of reality, Monolith has been able to populate the world of TRON with unusual characters.

terms of how the world looks. We worked with the *Aliens* and *Predator* licenses, which were much more constrained in terms of what aliens do, what predators do. *TRON*, on the other hand, is basically 'how far can your imagination take you?' What could some of this stuff look like since we don't have the physical properties of our universe to contend with? We can put things into the game you'd never be able to put into any other kind of game."

Monolith seems to having a great time riffing on the subject matter with game mechanics and terminology. (And they'll have more time—literally—as the game's original release date of March has morphed into August.) Instead of populating the world with crates, there are data blocks and archive bins. Instead of armor, weapons, or powerups, there are subroutines. Instead of keys, there are permissions. When you kill, or "de-rezz", an enemy, it leaves behind a core dump that can replenish your health and energy. This is the sort of stuff that computer gamers are geeks enough to appreciate and enjoy, particularly since Monolith is building these concepts into the gameplay.

Finally, the timing is right. Just because a twenty-year-old movie was a flop doesn't mean it didn't make a splash. With Monolith's *TRON 2.0* and Disney's planned sequel, the ripples are finally making their way towards gamers and moviegoers. *TRON* lovers are entering their thirties, when they can make the sorts of decisions that get games and movies made. People like Bob Picunko and Jason Hall and countless others working at Monolith and Disney are old enough and successful enough that when someone asks if they've seen *TRON*, they don't have the change their answers from "yes" to "no." And when asked if they were surprised to find out that *TRON* as a brand seems to be on the upswing, they reply, to a man, that the only surprise is that it took so long.

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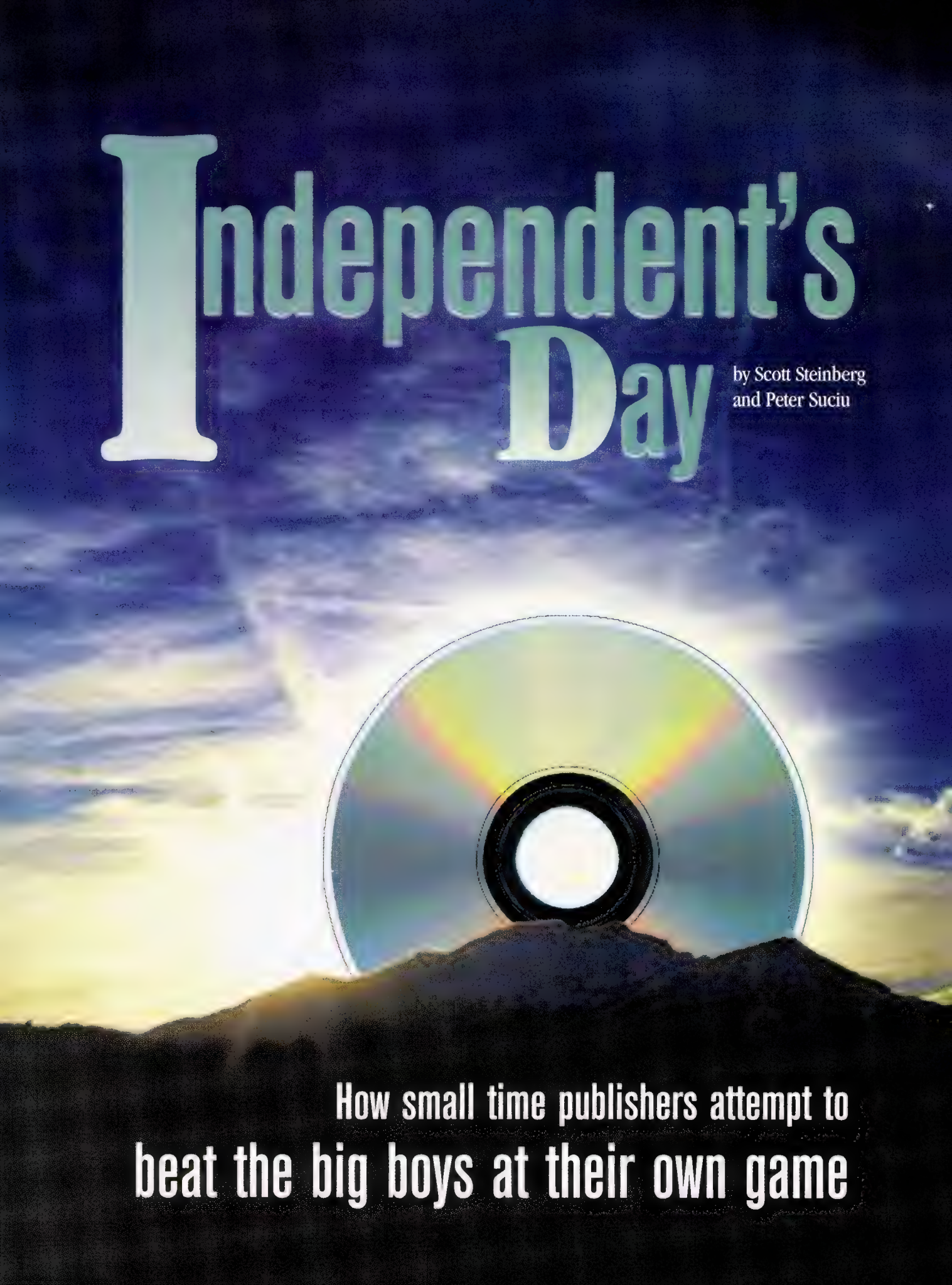
Independent's Day

by Scott Steinberg and Peter Suciu



How small time publishers attempt to beat the big boys at their own game

Gaming is what you make of it. For some it's a hobby, and for others a way of life. But for a growing cadre of independent publishing and development outfits—the "garage" operators of the industry—it's also becoming big business. They know something you don't know: despite the attention paid to the annual Electronic Entertainment Expo, not to mention those flashy ads for the latest PlayStation 2 and Xbox titles, not everything in the world of interactive entertainment begins or ends with big budgets and bigger marketing campaigns.

On the bright side, a self-funded project doesn't mean a substandard one anymore. Today's independent games needn't suffer from lackluster visuals or even a cut-rate experience in terms of gameplay. The products manufactured by many of these companies are as ambitious as projects from major development studios with budgets many times larger. Indies are even moving into territory that only a few years ago seemed solidly controlled by majors, such as the massively multiplayer online space.

For Steve Snow, producer on the in-development *Horizons*, independent and proud was the only way to go. "Developing independently makes the most sense for this project," he stresses. "There are things that we want to accomplish with *Horizons* that break a lot of the perceived rules within the massively multiplayer space." He believes that traditional publishing houses typically reach in and often over-control a project, and while Horizons might not be quite as overly ambitious as it was originally conceived, he feels that the end result—as with other, similar productions—will be better and more original because its creator, Artifact Entertainment, took an abstract route to get the game published.

Money Talks

If the concept of playing lone wolf sounds pleasant thus far, it's only because you haven't heard all the facts or the many downsides inherent to the process. Although it seems obvious, by far and away the biggest detriment to indie players is their largely universal lack of resources. Whereas major publishing projects are possessed of multi-million-dollar budgets, an independent game can range in development costs from as little as $10,000 to as much as half a million dollars. Furthermore, money doesn't always buy success. "We spent $150,000 creating *Lightweight Ninja*," sighs Wardell, who relied on online sales to carry the title. "In the end, it sold only a few hundred copies." A frightening glimpse of reality, but one independent shops have to deal with every day. Although it is possible to achieve decent product sales strictly via word of mouth and press coverage, Wardell estimates 5000 copies sold via the Web as an absolute best-case scenario. Timothy Brooks, president of Shrapnel Games (www.shrapnelgames.com), disagrees. Although his products—almost all wargames—cater to a niche market, he places the number of potential sales closer to 20,000 units. Given that one of the company's premier products—*Space Empires IV*—crested the $600,000 revenue mark last year, there might just be something here to consider.

Or not, if you take into account that this figure represents the course of the franchise's lifespan, dating back to 1995. Even the most critically acclaimed titles don't see sales that reflect their preeminent status—sources confirm that last year's Independent Games Festival winner, *Bad Milk*, sold around 100 copies. What's more, you must consider the repercussions of such an investment. Realize that most products that enjoy the benefits of retail distribution sell around 20-30,000 copies; independents don't have even that luxury. Therefore it makes little sense to invest heavily in your first project—the ability to do the requisite research on a given market condition, spread costs across numerous titles, and carefully seize upon opportunities so as to create an ongoing presence for your venture separates long-term players from flashes in the pan.

Besides, even if you do come up with a stunning debut, chances are, no major players will recognize it. According to Wardell, the product evaluation room at GT Interactive (a company since acquired by Infogrames) looked much like the ending scene of *Raiders of the Lost Ark*; countless products stacked upon the shelves, where they sat collecting dust, never to be catalogued or coaxed into their full potential. "So many cool games you've never even heard of were buried there, it's heart wrenching," he says with a wistful sigh.

Silver lining

Still, aspiring game gurus shouldn't let themselves get discouraged; there's a light at the end of this tunnel. Several, to be honest, if you consider the number of people whose gaming careers you can ultimately affect with a given project. "Shrapnel Games brings products to the wargamers that major publishers won't touch," explains Brooks. "Our [partners] and customers get a personal touch you just won't get anywhere else." Opening doors that would otherwise be closed to certain individuals is also a major benefit. "Developers think they have to go with large publishers to make money... the nice thing is, we usually hear from them, 'I should have listened to you.'"

If it weren't for independent outfits, the world might never know *DOOM* or *Duke Nukem*. Self-funded development is a road you embark upon for personal pleasure, not fame or lucre. It's about pride, determination,

Declaration of Independents

by Cindy Yans

Inside the Independent Games Festival

The world of movies may have dozen of festivals devoted to the art of independent film–from Sundance to Slamdance–but there is only one true Mecca for their counterparts in the world of interactive entertainment. Established in 1998 to encourage innovation in game development and to recognize the best independent game developers, the Independent Games Festival has become and annual event where the future stars of tomorrow might just be spotted.

And while IGF director Alex Dunne admits that you might not see the next big title to storm the shelves at Wal-Mart come as a result of the showcase, you can count on plenty of innovative titles to arrive courtesy of the festival contenders, even if they aren't necessarily for the PC. "The next big thing could be a J2ME (Java) game developed by an indie," he says.

As the festival grows in size, Dunne also emphasizes that he is constantly impressed and surprised by what he sees the indie developers creating, "That's what's kept me enthusiastic about the IGF for these five years. It's incredible what a small team with talent and vision can come up with in six months without spending a dime. But what's even more surprising is the fact that money and development time seem to be independent variables with respect to my enjoyment of a game."

As you're reading this, the kings and queens of this year's Independent Games Festival will have already been crowned, and titles like *Devil Whiskey* and *Future Boy* will have made their way back to the drawing board. Chosen from a field of 87 entries, here are the 10 finalists:

Teenage Lawnmower
Robinson Technologies (Fukuyama-shi, Hiroshima-ken, Japan)
Budget $1,000
Development Time 8 months
You're a 17-year-old kid, and your alcoholic mother and her abusive boyfriend are making your life hell. Save your family by mowing lawns for big bucks.

Furcadia
Dragon's Eye Productions (Austin, TX, USA)
Budget $50,000
Development Time 5-6 years
An ambitious massively multiplayer online role-playing game that places you into a fantasy world in animal form. This baby boasts its own level design toolset.

Pontifex 2
Chronic Logic (Santa Cruz, CA, USA)
Budget $2000
Development Time 5 weeks
Play sim civil engineer as you design and test bridges using given materials and a specified budget. When you're done, you'll see if your bridge will stand up to real-world-like stress tests.

Strange Adventures in Infinite Space
Digital Eel (Kirkland, WA, USA)
Budget $1,000
Development Time 6 months
A game of space exploration and adventure in which you take the role of a starship commander. It features turn-based movement and a real-time combat interface.

Word Ninja
Shizmoo Games, Inc. (New York, NY, USA)
Budget $0
Development Time 1 year
This game is a Scrabble-like crossword game that includes bonuses for the word itself, its length, and what letters it includes.

BaseGolf
Alitius (Foster City, CA, USA)
Budget $0
Development Time 1 month
A cartoon-y hybrid of baseball and golf, this title takes the batter and pitcher from baseball and places them in different golf-course-esque scenarios.

Wild Earth
Super X Studios (Federal Way, WA, USA)
Budget $5,000
Development Time 5 months
As a photojournalist for one of the world's biggest nature magazines, your job is to stalk big game on the plains of Africa, explore the wild, and take photos of animals in their natural habitats.

Mr Bigshot
Mr. Bigshot, Inc. (Cincinnati, OH, USA)
Budget $87,000
Development Time 2 years
This is an investment game where players flash back in time and invest in real stocks, using true historical information and pricing data, and challenging you to avoid the Enrons of yore.

Reiner Knizia's Samurai
Klear Games, LLC (Dallas, TX, USA)
Budget $250,000
Development Time 14 months
A turn-based strategy game of balance and conquest. The objective is to secure your influence within the three feudal casts.

Terraformers
Pong Interactive HB (Tumba, Sweden)
Budget $40,000
Development Time 1.5 years
A 3D first-person adventure game in which mankind has begun to colonize planets and uses intelligent robots to break in the terrain. The game features special audio feedback interface enabling players with sight disabilities to navigate through the world.

For more information about the IGF, visit its website at www.indiegames.com

Alex Dunne is the current chairperson of the Independent Games Festival.

At odds with current conventions, a few companies have found it's still possible to create solid titles for next to nothing. Some are even doing it relying on designated expenditures that would barely pay the coffee bill at a mid-sized development studio, let alone keep the break rooms in Redmond stocked with soda. Yet in this day and age of corporate takeovers, with fewer and fewer developers truly taking the independent route, the question must be asked, why do it at all?

Magazines (typically) don't cover these products. Retailers won't give them a second glance. Even the public at large snubs their very existence. But to at least a few players in an industry perpetually obsessed with tapping the golden goose that is mainstream acceptance, it isn't about the number of units sold, but rather creating solid games without interference, and investing your heart and soul in what may hopefully become a stepping stone to larger things.

The Lone Ranger

Crack the history books, and you'll find choosing the path less taken isn't so farfetched for proponents of gaming. Simple facts establish that the original computer game industry was in reality a grassroots, independent-minded venture that began in the 1970s with one-man operations self-publishing their titles as best they could by directly selling them as disks wrapped in baggies or by pursuing distribution at small mom and pop software stores. Such notable entrepreneurs included the likes of Richard "Lord British" Garriott, who would go on to build an empire known as Origin, founded upon the *Ultima* series.

Garriott and many others would get their start and go on to bigger development studios, but even today the independent scene is very much alive and well. Only no one's doing it to get rich quick.

"If it's a lot of money you want, make databases," laughs Brad Wardell, CEO of Stardock Systems (www.stardock.com), whose space strategy epic *Galactic Civilizations* is currently in production. "Becoming an independent is about taking control of your own destiny, and doing something you love."

Freedom. How often people have taken it for granted, but none quite as much as game designers. All too frequently ensnared by a publishing deal that alleviates their control over a product's destiny, these folks are ultimately left to face the music once a substandard product reaches store shelves. Hence you hear the topic echoed time and again by those freed of such constraints.

"The biggest advantage of flying solo is that you avoid the horror stories," says Clay Dreslough, president of Sports Mogul Inc. (www.sportsmogul.com), a company that has created a small but thriving franchise of front-office sports titles including the *Baseball Mogul* series. Dreslough says he turned down a job offer with a large publisher, fearing that they weren't committed to their PC sports game line. Fast-forward to three years later and that selfsame publisher has essentially abandoned the product line… but the Sports Mogul titles are still going strong.

and ultimately, standing strong in the face of criticism… much of which, we're ashamed to admit, comes from an uncaring, unsympathetic media.

"Yes, we get press coverage," explains Brooks. "But they don't always 'get it.' Reviewers harp upon our titles' lack of million-dollar graphics. They don't understand that niche products can't afford that level of production. It's the most frustrating part of this business." And he's one of the lucky ones. Titles like Wardell's *Galactic Civilizations* sometimes—and mistakenly at that—reap almost no coverage whatsoever.

Additionally, the process of establishing a product is extremely time consuming. Indie developers have to handle marketing and distribution after a title is finished, not to mention cultivate a thriving fan base for their product. "Whereas the bigger publishers have already established themselves in both of these areas," emphasizes Snow, "and have better resources to get the job done than a smaller publishing company such as ourselves." Then again, larger outfits don't get to directly see the way their titles impact the individual, nor get a hearty slap on the back in terms of positive, personalized encouragement from the very people who purchase their games.

Playing for keeps

However you look at the situation, it's a slippery slope. Many can't survive the climb. You have to respect all those who attempt the challenge—they're undoubtedly playing with fire… and their very livelihood.

"The biggest disadvantage we face is the inability to easily survive the negative events that are part of our business," says Sports Mogul's Dreslough, who explains how a legal dispute with a publisher over owed money took attention away from the developing of games. Additionally, Sports Mogul didn't really even the have the resources to fully pursue the matter in court, yet Dreslough admits he still manages to pay the bills…most of the time. "In some years I make a very good living and I've had other years that were much less successful. If you plan to start a small game developer, or work for one, you need to be prepared for this kind of uncertainty."

The reward for such risk? Personal growth. Teamwork plays a big part in going the independent route. Company sizes may be much smaller and as a result, each individual involved gets a chance to do more and even branch out in areas that are usually relegated to specialty departments at a large publisher. "Everyone contributes at Artifact," explains Snow. "In a startup situation many people fill many roles. We have a lot of proactive people making sure that the job gets done and that everything meshes together."

It's an excellent way to learn the ins and outs of an ever-evolving business. But this does mean that no matter how much one does, there's always more work waiting. Nevertheless, Snow maintains learning the tricks of the trade in a hands-on environment is the ultimate compensation. "There's greater potential for gaining development experience at an independent company such as Artifact Entertainment. Ultimately, you'll also have a more rewarding day."

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4.5 / 5
Computer Games

4.5 / 5
Computer Games Magazine

9.5 / 10
Game Informer

MATURE M CONTENT RATED BY ESRB
Blood
Violence

PC CD

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Unreally Uninspired

Despite amazing visuals, the clichéd **Unreal II: The Awakening** doesn't push the envelope

★★★

BY JASON CROSS

WITH ALL OTHER games forcing you to sit through a series of boring company logo video clips, *Unreal II* treats you to a slick fly-through sequence similar to what you would find in the title sequence of some of Hollywood's latest blockbusters. It presents the company logos, and ultimately the game's title, with an in-engine display of bizarre but appealing shapes synchronized with cool techno beats reminiscent of the Demo Scene of old. This approach is downright fresh and exciting, promising an original game with excellent production values. It lies.

You play John Dalton, a space marine wearing powered armor, the quintessential shooter cliché. Okay, to be fair, you start out as an ex-Marine, now a Marshal for the Terran Colonial Authority, patrolling the "ass-end of space" (as he says) with a few other military rejects. You want nothing more than reinstatement into the Marines, but for now you're sent off to investigate distress signals and mop up after the big boys. You're not the only action game cliché on board your ship the Atlantis, though. Take the gruff, gravelly-voiced chain-smoking engineer, Issak. He's pretty much useless, and just there to tell you things about your weapons that you figured out in the previous mission. There's Aida, supposedly some kind of genius chess prodigy recruited into military service at a very young age where she served as a brilliant tactician, and now serves as your first officer and Intelligence specialist. Like all brilliant military strategist tacticians that grew up with chess and joined the military young, she dresses like a space whore and has a giant snake tattoo that slithers down her bare midriff, leading to you-know-where. She gives you mission briefings as you jump from planet to planet, none of which are important because all you do is

run through linear levels shooting everything in sight. The only highlight in the game's cast of uninspired characters is your alien pilot Ne'Ban, whose innocent curiosity, funny accent, and struggle with English makes conversations with him a constant source of amusement.

The design for the original *Unreal* was a sort of single contiguous space, one escaped prisoner's trek across a hostile alien planet to blast off in an escape pod and drift helplessly in space. "To Be Continued." *Unreal II* does not continue that story. In fact, it has absolutely nothing to do with the first game at all, save that one of the enemies you fight happens to be the Skaarj again. You don't really see the Skaarj that much anyway, and with none of the original weapons making a reappearance and not a Nali in sight, you have to wonder if the name of this game has more to do with marketing than anything else. (If it works for *Final Fantasy*...) This time around, each mission takes place on a different planet, each connected only by a tenuous thread of a plot. You know the drill: there are powerful alien artifacts out there, and you need to get them before the bad guys do. There's a twist at the end, but it doesn't take a cynic to be disappointed by how obvious it is.

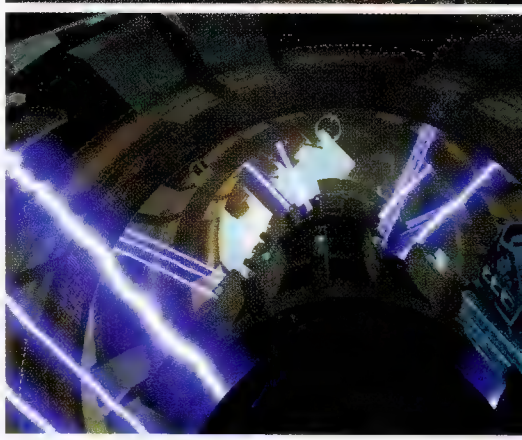
The level architecture is easily the best reason to play the game. Intricate interiors blink and buzz with activity, loaded with cool lighting and fancy special effects. Landscapes stretch miles to the horizon, and the detail just doesn't quit. You walk across amazing alien landscapes to a building that looked so far away you would never reach it, and then go inside and rough up some aliens. You ride elevators hundreds of feet in the air for a birds-eye view of your surroundings. Your trek through these worlds is a visual treat of unparalleled splendor, and it doesn't come cheap. This game definitely continues Origin's grand old tradition of making you upgrade your machine and then rewarding you with the kind of visuals you can scarcely believe are on your screen. But if there's a sore spot to these outlandishly cool graphics, it's the people. They have that squat, rounded appearance with disproportionately large heads endemic of shooters made in the *Quake II* era. The polygon counts have risen and the textures are a billion times sharper, but they still don't quite look like people. Fortunately, the vast majority of your encounters are with armored marines, corporate mercenaries, and strange aliens, so the problem doesn't crop up that often.

It's a shame the astounding technical prowess and artistry evident in the graphics isn't present in the audio. The sound effects are nice and meaty and there's good use of 5.1 surround sound, but the voice acting is unremarkable and the music is a curious two-faced monster. A compelling orchestral score accompanies the cut scenes, but you spend the vast majority of your time during gameplay listening to uninspired techno loops.

It's impossible to know exactly where Legend's development ends and Epic Games' production begins, but it seems as though they're at odds with each other. The plot is tired and obvious, but they hammer it home anyway in pre-mission briefings that try desperately to add depth to the hackneyed characters. The cut scenes are a total disaster—boring transition sequences of your ship landing or taking off and long drawn-out conversations between your crew members. This dialog could be interesting if there was any reason to want to know more about your shipmates, but they never really do much of anything. They're virtual signposts, spewing out marginally relevant information with soulless tracking heads and eyes, entirely devoid of body language and speaking in the sort of unnaturally slow and deliberate manner usually reserved for giving speeches. At some point a third of the way through the game, you'll find yourself wanting to skip the stupid mission briefing or History of Aida speech and just get down do the damn planet so you can shoot up some aliens and gawk at the graphics.

Clearly, combat is where it's at for this game, and fortunately, it's very satisfying. Despite an overabundance of guns with too many firing modes, they're almost all powerful and useful, and mowing down bad guys never gets old. The enemy AI is competent enough to keep you on your toes, though not clever enough to force you to make interesting tactical decisions. This is an adrenaline-rush combat game

The Skaarj, and only the Skaarj, return from the first game; It just wouldn't be Unreal without some real "wow" architecture.

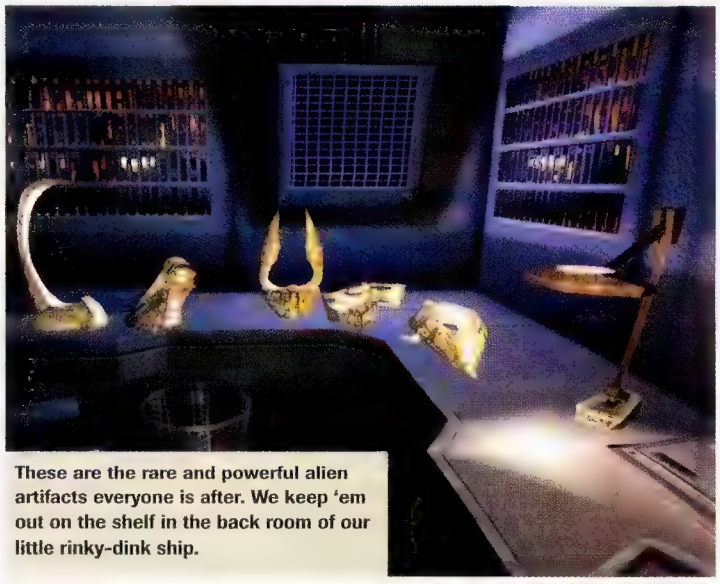


Torching bugs with a flamethrower never really grows tiresome. [left] As you can plainly see, Aida is a chess prodigy and strategic genius. The tattoo must be to draw attention away from her gargantuan head.

where you strafe and dodge with all the twitch reflexes you can muster while blowing your enemies to bloody chunks with big heavy boomsticks. Sadly, there are only a few precious moments where you fight alongside a handful of Marines, which is so exciting and refreshing that you can't help but wonder why fight solo through the other 95% of the game. Has *Halo* taught us nothing? Was there more planned for the gameplay than a linear level romp? Why can I lean around corners if there's no stealth? Why are there a couple dozen usable items and hatches on the Atlantis (and none of the other levels) that never do anything?

After waiting four years to continue the adventures of that stranded escaped prisoner from *Unreal* (note the snide comment in the tutorial where the technician mentions "it's been an Epic wait for the tech upgrade"), fans probably deserve more than this. *Unreal II* is bested by previous high-profile shooters in nearly every area: the AI in the aging *Half-Life* was better; the sound in *Medal of Honor* blows this away; and the cut scenes and exposition in the *No One Lives Forever* series leave this in the dust.

The area where *Unreal II* manages to elevate itself above average is in the astonishingly gorgeous graphics, and while that definitely adds to the entertainment value, it is, as always, the gameplay, story, and interactions that really matter.



These are the rare and powerful alien artifacts everyone is after. We keep 'em out on the shelf in the back room of our little rinky-dink ship.

spotlight

All Brain, No Twitch

From the same company that released last year's charming *Passage: Path of Betrayal* comes *Elemental,* an addictive (but primitive looking) strategy game. You control an avatar and attempt to guide her through levels as she collects gemstones in order to defeat the evil Dr. Mechanico. Members of his robot army are cleverly placed to thwart your every move. The idea here is to solve the level by creating traps for the robots and other devices that are designed to zap you with one wrong move. Assisting you is magical control over the elements Earth, Fire, Water, and Air. You'll find yourself restarting levels often, but since they're not that large, it's not frustrating, and you'll most likely find yourself unable to stop playing "just one more level."

DragonWorks Interactive
www.dragonworksinteractive.com

Real Life Destroyer

Dark Age of Camelot: Shrouded Isles

★★★★½

COMPUTER GAMES EDITOR'S CHOICE

HAVE YOU EVER been addicted to *Dark Age of Camelot*? Did you then, perhaps, find a bit more of a life and cancel your account? If so, it's time to dredge up your sagging credit card once again because its first expansion, *Shrouded Isles*, offers just enough impetus to re-hook yourself and re-destroy your RL (read: "real life"). And they've saved your old characters. Really.

Shrouded Isles offers realm vs. realm gameplay set in an Arthurian/Celtic/Norse environment with a rich backstory and player-versus-player combat in the areas where the three realms meet. It's almost like a huge "Capture the Flag" game, in which a realm's control of a relic gives it additional bonuses. The first few *EverQuest* expansions added one new continent, and perhaps a new race, but in *Shrouded Isles*, the offering is tripled—three new lands you can portal to and from, one for each realm—and one new race and two new classes per realm. Granted, the sizes of the additional land masses are not as large as any one of the *EverQuest* add-ons, but you're also not paying for three new boxes. Additionally, there are scads of new quests, spells, items, armor, platypuses, and weapons, as well as a remarkably improved artificial intelligence system that makes the game so much more—buzzword warning—"immersive."

It's apparent that Mythic's design team spent a long time figuring out exactly what kind of new character race/class combinations would make for the best blend of skills overall. While the new characters' abilities are somewhat similar to the existing ones' (one magic-oriented and one combat-oriented class per realm), the real treat is that they all look really, really weird, creating a really fun multicultural atmosphere. And of course the mippy-mappy goodness of the new graphics system makes you just shake your head in awe at some of the landscapes and creatures.

While it's generally true that heralding a game expansion as "truly extraordinary" means that it should offer some particularly new revolutionary feature, this one does not. But there's so much superb content now that what it does offer is real value. So if you're an oldie, come back, and if you're a newbie, dive in. —*Cindy Yans*

DEVELOPER/PUBLISHER Mythic Entertainment ESRB Everyone

The Sylvans are Entish creatures that want to become nature; [left] Hobbknob goes stag.

top sellers

A Top Selling Failure

Is **The Sims Online** a failure? That was the early word from analysts after it "only" sold about 90,000 copies after a few weeks of availability. EA later said it had "made an error on expectations" and decided to lower its price at stores.

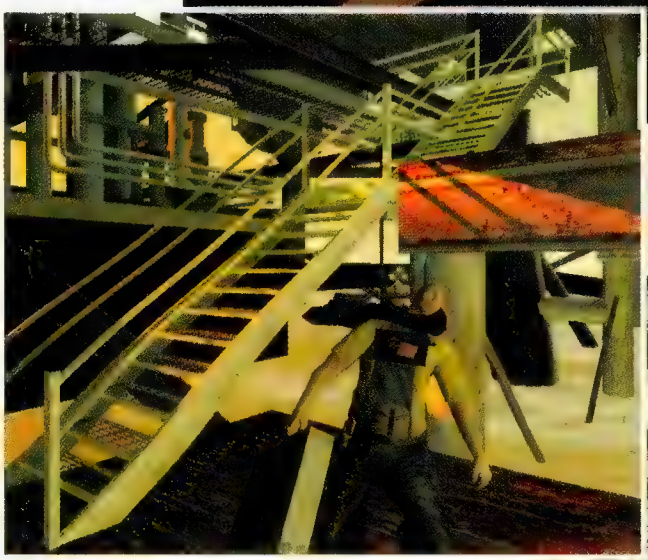
1. **The Sims Deluxe**
   Electronic Arts Not Rated
2. **The Sims Unleashed**
   Electronic Arts ★★★½
3. **Harry Potter & The Chamber Of Secrets**
   Electronic Arts Not Rated
4. **Roller Coaster Tycoon 2**
   Infogrames ★★★★
5. **Zoo Tycoon**
   Microsoft ★★★★½
6. **Backyard Hockey**
   Infogrames Not Rated
7. **Age Of Mythology**
   Microsoft ★★★★★
8. **The Sims Vacation**
   Electronic Arts ★★★★
9. **Zoo Tycoon: Marine Mania**
   Microsoft ★★★★
10. **WarCraft III: Reign Of Chaos**
    Vivendi Universal ★★★★
11. **Medal Of Honor: Spearhead**
    Electronic Arts ★½
12. **The Sims Hot Date**
    Electronic Arts ★★★★½
13. **Backyard Football 2002**
    Infogrames Not Rated
14. **Medal of Honor Allied Assault**
    Electronic Arts ★★★★½
15. **Dark Age of Camelot: Shrouded Isles**
    Vivendi Universal ★★★★½
16. **Backyard Baseball 2003**
    Infogrames Not Rated
17. **The Sims Online**
    Electronic Arts ★★★★
18. **Harry Potter & The Sorcerer's Stone**
    Electronic Arts ★★½
19. **Backyard Basketball**
    Infogrames Not Rated
20. **LOTR: The Fellowship of the Ring**
    Vivendi Universal ★★½

Source: NPDTechworld. The December list is based on units sold by more than 70 channel partners, representing 90% of the U.S. retail consumer market.

To Catch a Spy

Tom Clancy's Splinter Cell

★★★★½



Fisher can rappel down walls, and even kick through windows. [left] Sometimes a person needs a little... coercing... to spill the beans. [below] You spend a large portion of the game with your night vision turned on.

PARTS OF THE world are descending into chaos. Media reports say a splinter government is forming in the former Soviet state of Georgia. There are stories of genocide in Azerbaijan, and terrorists hold American soldiers captive. Intelligence reports state that someone is attempting to acquire a nuclear bomb. And what's this about the Chinese being involved?

Enter one Sam Fisher, formerly of the CIA and an ex-Navy SEAL, who joins a new sub-agency of the NSA called Third Echelon. He takes on a series of covert missions designed to gather intelligence and, occasionally, do some really nasty work. Though he's on a "need to know very little" basis, through his own investigations and some fragmented newscasts from a CNN-like broadcasts, he uncovers an enormous conspiracy with world leaders and corrupt generals. If he doesn't complete his objectives, the threat of World War III looms ominously, though the world is fortunate enough to be out of the loop on that one.

Such is the suitably tangled mess of acronyms and "countries that sound vaguely menacing because we don't know a lot about them" world of the Tom Clancy thriller, and the perfect setting for *Splinter Cell*. Previously available for Xbox, this third-person stealth-based spy game is a riveting tour de force, humbling console rivals like *Metal Gear Solid 2* with superior gameplay and technology. For PC players, it's essentially "Tom Clancy's Thief: The Dark Project," with more killing and considerably better graphics.

Powered by a heavily modified *Unreal* engine, the game looks fantastic. The environments are more real-world than an *Unreal*, so they don't provide the bulk of the game's visual pizzazz. Instead, UbiSoft went whole-hog on the lighting effects.

No game has used shadowing and lighting as effectively, and rather than just serve as technical masturbation, it superbly integrates the effects into the gameplay. But it can't quite help showing off its technical prowess at every opportunity. The missions are all set in the world's darkest environments—in Georgia and elsewhere, no one apparently pays the light bills (yet even the darkest rooms often have light streaming through a set of blinds). Those graphics do come at a price. Performance is spotty on all but the hottest rigs, and considering the game's original target platform is the Xbox with its NVIDIA-based graphics hardware, it's no big surprise to find that *Splinter Cell* works best with GeForce3 and 4 (non-MX) cards. In fact, some of the fancier real-time shadow effects don't display properly—or at all—on other cards, including the faster and more advanced Radeon 9700 cards.

Splinter Cell is relentlessly linear; you're always going from point A to point B, with clear objectives and no room for deviation from a set path. While that's normally a negative, the variety here comes from the different tactics you can utilize to complete your objectives and/or neutralize enemies. The PC version lends itself to even more of this, because unlike the checkpoint saves of the Xbox version, it lets you save anywhere. This encourages even more experimentation with approaches and eliminates most of the numbing repetition. (It also

Sometimes the lighting effects go a little overboard, but these scenes do look very cool.

makes the game considerably easier, though it's still far from being an easy game.) Where many games feel too short and others get bogged down with tedious repetition, it's exactly the right length, and you get a feeling of great satisfaction upon completing its missions.

It gets off to a bumpy start, with a contrived first mission that feels more like an extended tutorial then sound spying. Subsequent missions ratchet up the tension and prove slightly more logical. There's no denying that there's something unquestionably thrilling about sitting in the shadows while an armed soldier walks by unaware of your presence. If you need to get past him, you have multiple options. You could just sneak past him, risking being caught. You could shoot him, which assuming you don't get off a clean headshot may or may not alert others in the area. Or you could turn on your night vision, sneak up behind him, grab him, and then smack him upside the head. In some cases, you need to interrogate certain people for information, or you may need them—or at least their eyeballs—to pass retinal scanners, or in some instances you're just not allowed to kill people on the level (such as when you're infiltrating the CIA). The guards and soldiers are, for the most part, predictable and stupid, though if they didn't behave in this manner, it's hard to imagine the increase in the game's difficultly level.

As with any stealth game, the basic approach is to stay out of everyone's sight, be quiet, and only resort to weapons as a last resort. There's a wealth of visual and aural feedback to assist you, so much so that the on-screen overlays—which explicitly lay it out for you—are virtually unnecessary.

But conflict is inevitable, so Fisher has a large variety of moves and weapons at his disposal. As befitting a Clancy game, there are tons of gadgets to play with. Fisher is armed with a weak silenced pistol that's best used for shooting out lights (something you do a lot of), and on most missions has an SC-20K, an experimental assault rifle with a sniper scope. It also allows the use of special rounds that incapacitate people instead of killing them. And Fisher is one bad man, with plenty of moves. He creeps along in the shadows, climbs fences, rappels down walls and kicks through windows, climbs across ropes, pipes, or ledges, and leans against walls. He can also do some Jackie Chan-styled wall climbing when near a corner, and he can do the splits above narrow hallways. It looks painful, but it's (very) occasionally useful for dropping down on unsuspecting guards.

UbiSoft has devised an elegant control scheme for the PC edition. Where the Xbox uses an analog joystick to control movement speed, the PC version uses the mouse wheel; though it's somewhat less "cool," it's considerably simpler. Aiming a weapon is a lot easier with the mouse, as usual, and the mouse-based camera controls are more intuitive. Lockpicking, which on the Xbox cleverly utilizes its gamepad's force effects to simulate the tumblers of a lock, is somewhat useless in its PC incarnation. You just hammer the directional keys until you've successful picked the lock. However, the result is the same—picking locks takes time, and when the targeted door is in an illuminated area, that's a problem.

There are no problems with *Splinter Cell*, though. Assuming you have the hardware to run it, the superior controls and lowered difficulty of this PC version makes it a slightly better game than its console brethren. Once it gets started, the tension on each level is practically unbearable, and the final room of the final level provides the perfect ending to a game that sneaks up on you and never lets go. —*Steve Bauman*

DEVELOPER/PUBLISHER UbiSoft • ESRB Teen

Virtual Sims Reality

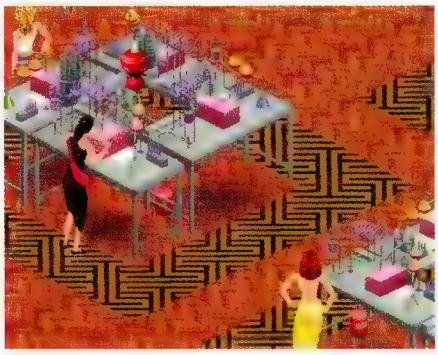
The Sims Online

★★★★

YOU'VE ADDED EVERY available expansion pack, spent hours customizing the swankest pad ever to grace the neighborhood, climbed your way up the corporate ladder, and amassed so many friends and loved ones that you begin to look at your real life and think, "Gee, if only I could actually be a Sim. I wonder what that would be like?" Well, wonder no more. *The Sims Online* has landed.

Maxis joins the realm of online massively multiplayer games with an entry that puzzles many dedicated gamers. There's no shooting, no monsters, and no killing. Instead, you spend your time much as you would in the single-player *Sims* games: fulfilling needs, making money, building, and of course, interacting with other Sims. But this time those Sims are other people and the world you're exploring is one created entirely by the players.

The Sims Online is a standalone product,



which means that you won't be using your own houses or existing Sims online. If you're still stuck on dial-up, take heart; it actually functions pretty well over slower connections, and during actual game play, you won't notice much lag time between your Sim and your broadband-blessed compatriots.

Once online, you pick a city in which to create your Sim, choose from a selection of about 200 heads and bodies provided for each gender, and enter a description for your character (real or fictional). At this point in the game, you can't change your physical appearance after the initial selection, so choose carefully and try to be unique (some of the future changes include "plastic surgeons" to change your face and clothes shops to change the rest of your appearance). The selection of heads and outfits runs the gamut from prep to punk, but is limited enough that you'll run into a few clones wherever you go, causing brief identity crises for everyone in the room. A wad of cash to complete the deal, and you're ready.

Your initial stake of 10,000 simoleans won't last forever. Property is expensive, and the best way to make your money last is to become somebody's roommate, or become a property leader and acquire roommates yourself. The simple economy gives price breaks on expansion costs to property leaders with roommates; the more you have, the less it costs to expand. Larger properties mean more visitors and, ultimately, more visibility. Since the game awards Simoleans to a property depending on the number of visitors and how long they stay, building and maintaining a popular property is an excellent way to make some major cash, not to mention build your social network.

If you're new, or just antisocial, you can still make some money through job objects, each of which requires skills such as logic or charisma. The pay increases with your skill level, and the number of players using similar objects in the same room. The single-user objects tend to pay less and require no active participation; it's dull, so bring a book, and check your Sim every few minutes. The multi-user objects,

[above] There can never be too many cooks when it comes to potions. [below] Work that body, and make money too.

Puzzling

"After reading a recent issue of *Computer Games*, I noticed that you mentioned something about small game developers making 'crappy' games, or something to that effect. I just wanted to give you a heads up on a pretty neat game. It's a puzzle game called *Igor*. Hopefully, these types of games start making a comeback! Who knows, this could be the *Tetris* of tomorrow." —*Leslie Ugolini*

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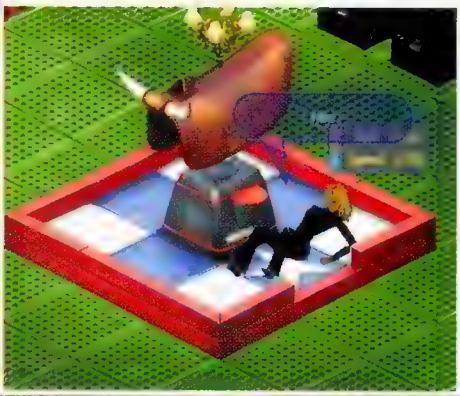


[top to bottom] The mechanical bull won this round; People create their own little mini-games and entertainment, such as beauty contests, quizzes, and in this case, a Bachelor Auction; People set up their own marriages in the game. Good thing there's a "Cry" action for the emotional Sim.

on the other hand, require both speed and some mental agility; they pay you more, but they'll make you sweat a little first.

Increasing skills is how you spend the rest of your time. They degrade after a certain point, and you spend many an hour doing mundane tasks like reading books and playing chess. This part of the game requires patience and an ability to multitask outside the game; you can work on your body skill and, say, get all your (real-world) laundry done at the same time. And watch the volume; the chatter of a roomful of Sims talking to mirrors gets annoying after about five minutes, and your family will wonder exactly what game you're playing if they hear the bad-porn soundtrack of the bench press. But it's not all bad, as it's also a good time to chat with other players and make some friends.

Virtually everything in this game centers around social interaction, which is a sneaky way of forcing players to work together. If you study in groups, your skill level increases more quickly. If you work with other people, you earn more money. In fact, it encourages player cooperation to the point where it's almost impossible to get ahead in the game as a single player without spending a lot more time and money. This is not a game for the misanthropic, so come prepared to play with others. The players in the game are, at least at this stage, incredibly friendly and helpful. Beyond player-to-player interaction, however, is a whole new realm of Sim activity. Not only can your Sim laugh, cry, gossip, and flirt, but also fart, rap, swing dance…you name it, and it adds a lot to general silliness of the entire game.

Unfortunately, the player limit per lot peaks at 18 Sims, which means you won't see any large crowds and you may find yourself waiting in order to join a popular property (for those on dial-up, it can take even longer). You may wonder where all the other players actually are; the cartography screen marks the location of current players with flashing red dots, but it's difficult to get a sense of how many are active without using the only sporadically useful search function or clicking on specific properties. However, once you've connected with a person, you can send her an instant message, or write her a letter when she's not logged on. The friendship web feature will also help you keep track of all your buddies, and their buddies too.

Since there's no princess to save and no treasure to find, what exactly is the point of *The Sims Online*? There is none. It's a game about nothing. It's about enjoying the challenge of building the latest and greatest Logic Palace or Cooking Corner on the block, and hanging out with people who like *The Sims* as much as you do. The game, thus far, has offered constant updates and improvements, and it's a world entirely in the hands of its players, so the possibilities for creativity and expansion are virtually endless. *—Jessica Theon*

DEVELOPER Maxis • PUBLISHER Electronic Arts • ESRB Teen

Reality Blights

SimCity 4

★★½

IT'S GREAT TO be the mayor. You get the power, the respect, the admiration, the adoration, and if you believe *Blazing Saddles* and *The Simpsons*, you get to wear a cool sash at public events that says "Mayor." If you're the mayor of a SimCity, though, you can listen to the incessant whining of a city full of, well, whining Sims, which is probably closer to reality.

Reality is the main problem with *SimCity 4*, the latest iteration of the series you can blame for the existence of *Mall Tycoon*. If you used past *SimCity* games as a sort of electronic sandbox to build the metropolis of your dreams, you're in for a rude shock; the harsh reality of city building has replaced the light and breezy feel of previous games. As in real life, it's seriously hard to balance the needs of a city, and despite a wealth of new features that increase the depth of the game exponentially, it feels like the game forces you down a very specific path to success. It's so difficult to build cities beyond five-figure populations it drains much of the entertainment from the game, and you need to reach higher populations to have access to half of the cool city additions, regardless of the amount of simoleans you have on hand.

As with all of the games in the series, you plan your city, control the zoning of three types of regions (residential, commercial, and industrial, or RCI) with three levels of density, and supply its various services, from fire and police to hospitals and power. If your city is a happening place, Sims move in. If they're unhappy with your tax rates or that toxic waste dump next door, they move out. It's a constant balancing act of taxing and spending and planning, and it remains one of the most winning concepts ever created for a computer.

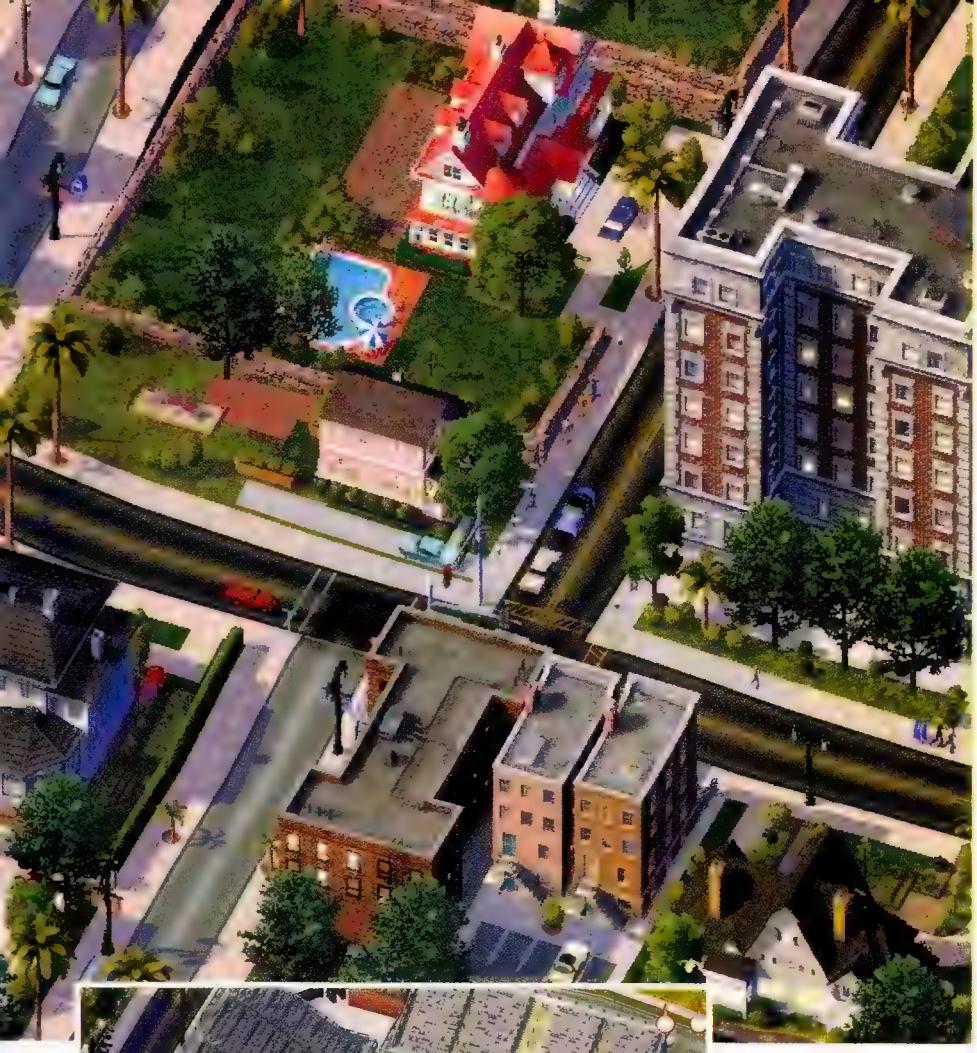
The biggest change in *SimCity 4* is the concept of a SimNation. You still create individual cities, but each is connected to others in the grander nation. Linking cities provides bonuses, and in theory, you can create cities designed for a single purpose, such as a residential city, or the power plant and garbage town. Cities connecting to the latter can buy their power and export their garbage, eliminating a source of pollution. (And creating a virtual hell on earth in the power and garbage town.)

While the concept is sound, and adds a welcome new layer of strategy and complexity, its actual implementation is at times disastrous. When starting a city, you can terraform it to your heart's content in a literal "God" mode, but when creating a region from scratch, you get to do it for the hundred or so individual squares instead of doing it on a region-level. Needless to say, that's tedious. There is also no buffer area between cities. If you alter the edge of one, it affects the terrain of its neighbor, so you need to use the "Reconcile Edges" feature to match them up. But if you use it on an occupied city, you may find half of it destroyed by the subsequent changes. The same type of wanton destruction occurs if you connect cities with roads or power lines (you need both if you want commerce or industrial bonuses, or to sell power between cities), as the connection appears in a square in the other map, destroying whatever may be there.

[above] The rich part of town always looks clean; [left] All of the buildings in the game look amazing, though it's at a cost, performance-wise; [right] Now that's detail; your Sims gather at the minor league stadium for some soccer action.

You can also easily, and permanently, delete entire cities you've spent hours creating. Nowhere in the documentation or in the on-screen prompts does it mention that importing a city from another region permanently deletes it from its original home. When did "import" become "move"? Why can't a city exist in different regions? It would be great to be able to "seed" a new region with a few of your own prebuilt cities in order to help boost your new creations; lord knows Maxis didn't include any complete cities with the game to help you out and/or provide guidance.

Once you have a city up and running, those negatives start to melt away as you're sucked in to the absolutely, jaw-droppingly beautiful visuals. They do come at a cost, however. The performance defines "sluggish." Zooming in and out on your city produces an interesting ripple effect as it reloads new graphics; for up to a few minutes on some machines, your city looks like a digital Rorschach test. Though it's easy to forget, *SimCity* has always been on the cutting edge. *SimCity 2000* was one of the first high-resolution games back in 1993; its performance was equally mediocre with the average machine of its day. *SimCity 3000* was considerably less visually ambitious, and many of the same people complaining about the per-



formance of the game today criticized it then.

At least it's obvious where the performance goes. Never before has this type of game delivered such a rich visual experience. It's not just eye candy, as the majority of the graphics deliver unprecedented levels of visual feedback about your city. With its greater visual fidelity, it cries out even more for a true sandbox mode, one with no monetary concerns, just so you could observe your cool city. Buildings degrade when something's wrong, traffic fills up the streets, chalk outlines occur if crime is high or if urban blight is taking over, and people picket if funding is too low at a school or hospital.

The simulation itself is also more complex, and taxes your processor even more. Taxes are improved and changed from previous games, letting you change the rates for low- through high-wealth residential, commercial, and industrial. You can alter funding on a local as well as global level for certain types of services. Instant feedback polls give you a general idea of how your city is doing, and how people view your efforts. There are some questionable parts of the simulation, like the lack of impact crime appears to have, and why an entire area appears desirable almost all the time yet no one moves in, but that may have more to do with a lack of understanding of the simulation than actual bugs. (It does have a few crash problems, though, and there's a known problem with the "MySims" feature and the special transportation disc available at some retailers.)

It's still amazing how the game teaches players about the interconnectedness of a city, how doing something simple like raising taxes causes a ripple effect. There's a lot more micromanagement available to the player to tune and tweak a city. Do you want one fully funded big school or multiple partially funded ones? One hospital or a bunch of regional clinics? These types of decisions are interesting, meaningful, and it's easy to see the impact of each individual change, either through visually or by consulting the various graphs and overlays.

But there's little in the visuals or the charts tell you how it all works together, and that's ultimately the game's undoing. The insane success of *The Sims* has overshadowed its more complex and considerably more detailed cousin. Since *The Sims* is kind of the antithesis of a hardcore game, it's altered expectations of a *SimCity*. Expecting it to be warm and fuzzy and simple leaves you unprepared for its complexity. A useless manual and in-game tutorial tells you little beyond how to navigate the interface. The $20 extra-cost manual—a.k.a. the hint book—is long on providing detailed charts with a lot of numbers and data and short on providing the one thing the game needs more than anything—a simple tutorial on building a prosperous city. Despite the large volume information available to the player, nothing tells you why a city stops growing, or why people are leaving. It's easy for experienced players get lost in the changes; how new players are supposed to digest all of this is a mystery.

SimCity 4 is the most complex Sim product ever made. It is considerably more realistic, but it tips the design more toward challenge than entertainment. Because the game adheres so much to real-world city building, it's harder and harder to build the city of your dreams; instead, you end up with Los Angeles, whether you want to or not, because that's the only way to create a workable city. It provides a more daunting challenge while losing the simple pleasure it always delivered of fooling around with a town and just seeing what happens. There's little doubt there's a great game in there, maybe one of if not the best of its type, but the weight of reality buries it.
—Steve Bauman

DEVELOPER Maxis • PUBLISHER Electronic Arts • ESRB Everyone

The Island of Dr. Derivative

Impossible Creatures

★★½

Rex Chance meets his first "impossible creature."

IT'S BEEN A long journey for *Impossible Creatures*, Relic Entertainment's follow-up to its space epic *Homeworld*. In the three years since it was announced, it has gone under more aliases than an al Qaeda operative. First it was called *Sigma*. Then *Sigma: The Adventures of Rex Chance*. Then, right after the suits settled the name game and picked a focus-group-friendly title, play-balancing delays pushed the release back more than six months. With so many twists and turns there's got to be a good story in there somewhere.

Unfortunately, the story of how *Impossible Creatures* made it from conception to retail is probably more interesting than the game itself. It appears Relic never got beyond the initial conceit, namely that it would be a cool idea to make a real-time strategy game where units were custom-crafted by crossbreeding. While it is undeniably neat to play the mad scientist version of Dr. Doolittle and create an army of sperm whales crossed with scorpions and elephants mixed with skunks, gameplay is more about concocting these abominations than it is doing something entertaining with them. The number of animal combinations and the story-driven campaign make playing God fun for a while, but everything soon gets bogged-down boring because there is nothing to do but crank out units for one brainless battle after another.

Still, the core of the campaign is fascinating. You play Rex Chance, intrepid adventurer in the tradition of the movie serial hero that inspired Spielberg and Lucas to create Indiana Jones. The year is 1937, and Chance has been summoned by his father to a remote island in the South Pacific. Your family reunion doesn't go as planned, however, and you're soon fighting Upton Julius and the "impossible creatures" bred by his Sigma Technology with a freakish animal army of your own. Relic has done a great job in bringing this strange world to life. Full 3D graphics make the island landscapes look like postcards and the creatures look like something out of a nightmare. There's even a spooky, glass-eyed aspect to each beastie that lets you know that God wasn't in his heaven when they popped out of their test tubes. Well-scripted cutscenes do a good job linking missions together. Story elements provide branching objectives and problems to be solved on the fly. Chance, love interest Lucy Willing, and evil Dr. Julius are voiced like characters out of a comic book, while Jeremy Soule's soundtrack boasts outstanding jazz numbers.

Battles are chaotic and fast-paced.

As already noted, *Impossible Creatures* has been constructed around the notion of manufacturing your own army of units. In order to battle your way across the island chain and defeat Julius in the campaign, you have to capture animal genetic samples and then crossbreed two samples. For example, you might craft a "Crocy Owl" with the jaws of a crocodile and the wings of a snowy owl. Or a "Tiging Cobra" with the venomous head of a spitting cobra and the torso of a swift tiger. Or a "Piraneagle" with the teeth of a piranha and the flying ability of an eagle. Your options are ostensibly limited only by your imagination, as you can easily tinker with any creature's appendages until you get the monstrosity you want. Certain creatures have special abilities that lend bonuses to attacking and defending. Piranha and great white shark-based creatures can go into frenzies, those with ant and dragonfly genetics can resist poison, beasts with elephant and bull forebears can charge, and so on.

At the start of play, it's undoubtedly a lot of fun just trying out different combos on the battlefield, but this fades as soon as the novelty wears off. Boredom becomes a factor partly because of a limited number of combinations with which to experiment. Although there are thousands of variants due to the ability to adjust limbs, wings, torsos, and heads, most options aren't recommended. You soon discover that there's really only one way to combine one creature with another, assuming you want to take advantage of each animal's important

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Computer opponents go for the throat in skirmish games; [below left to right] Beware the long reach of the "Polar Chameleon"; Coal and electricity are the game's two resources.

characteristics. If you cross a baboon with a bat, for example, you always keep the former's massive arms and head and the latter's wings. You could make a "Babbat" without wings, or without that distinctive colored forehead, but all that does is weaken the creature. This same issue comes into play with virtually every combination. Your choices are trimmed further in the campaign because your storehouse of genetic samples is gathered slowly but surely, mission by mission. So there are really only dozens of options available, not the thousands advertised.

That's still pretty impressive, though it's not enough to offset derivative gameplay. Being able to make your own armies is the only thing that sets *Impossible Creatures* apart from the *Command & Conquer* formula established by Westwood a very long time ago. You build a few structures, fortify a base, and gather coal and generate electricity for use as resource materials. You research advanced technology in your Lab, for use in making more powerful creatures and stronger buildings. Get the picture? Management has been stripped down to allow you to focus on creating armies and waging war, but all this does is showcase further weaknesses. After you get your base up and running, all you do is breed one animal after another and wage a war of attrition against your opponent. The differences between your army of mutants and generic tanks and fighter planes soon begin to blur as you're just ordering multicolored blobs to smash into other multicolored blobs. It's all been done before.

now playing

Elisha Cuthbert
Actress
"24"

"I've grown to like the whole thriller/action [genre]. [No One Lives Forever 2] has some really witty humor. I thought I wasn't going to do well, since you have to use the keyboard and mouse and I have fake nails, bit I picked it up right away. [Splinter Cell] is probably the best game I've ever played in my life. It's just really smart. I love the stealthiness of it, and the graphics are sick. People may think this is kind of slow, but personally, that's more my speed." ***From the January issue of Spin Magazine.***

Maybe not with gorillas that possess the chompers of killer whales, but everything is very familiar.

Player vs. Computer skirmish and multiplayer modes are more satisfying. The simplistic style of play isn't as much of a liability when taking on up to five computer-controlled or human opponents. Games go by extremely quickly, even on the biggest maps, and possess a rapid-fire sensibility that doesn't afford you any time to think. The AI is a cunning adversary as well, playing smart and very aggressively. It can sometimes be predictable, however, selecting one method of attack and pressing it home until the end of the game regardless of its success rate. Multiplayer is supported through local networks, direct connections, and IC Online, a matching service that's a little on the rough side but does the job. Lag is a frequent problem with online play, though, at least on a dial-up connection.

For all its surface innovations, *Impossible Creatures* turns out to be the same old thing at its heart. While the ability to custom design units by breeding far-out animals is a great idea—and might bear fruit in the future if other designers are paying attention—all the concept is at present is a template that needs a lot of work. *—Brett Todd*

DEVELOPER Relic Entertainment • PUBLISHER Microsoft • ESRB Teen

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CONTENT RATED BY ESRB
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Napoleonic Battles: Campaign Wagram ★★½
Panzer Campaigns: Kursk '43 ★★★
Naval Campaigns: Tsushima ★★★½

[left to right] WAGRAM: There's something wrong with this picture—the French are supposed to be on the offense; KURSK: The opening stages of the battle—looks can be deceiving, as new features lift this Panzer Campaigns game out of the mire an initially non-mobile situation can cause; TSUSHIMA: Russian forces race for an objective line with the AI Japanese in hot—if cautious—pursuit.

IN TODAY'S shrunken world of wargaming, a designer or developer has few routes to take to earn a living. One of the most effective routes is reuse—reuse of code, reuse of visuals, even reuse of styles. John Tiller and HPS have been the best recent example of this route; chances are good that if you've played one or two Tiller designs, you'll recognize and be able to play any other in short order. That said, it's amazing the differences that a few variations in features can make, even amongst games with such closely related design philosophies. Tiller's latest three games, *Napoleonic Battles: Campaign Wagram*, *Panzer Campaigns: Kursk '43*, and *Naval Campaigns: Tsushima*, demonstrate this well.

These days Tiller often uses scenario designers to do most or all of the historical research and scenario development while he works on the game's programming. For *Wagram*, Bill Peters as obviously done extensive research on the historic aspects of this 1809 campaign, and in crafting dozens of alternative scenarios (some huge—over 100 turns) and maps to support different strategic pathways. The problem is that the *Napoleonic Battles* system is missing some improvements seen in other Tiller games and tedium often sets in. When you spend half or more of your gameplay watching a message box flash up "moving enemy units from unknown location to unknown location," something is wrong, either in the mechanics of the engine or in the application of it to a particular situation. Also, the battle of Wagram itself doesn't seem to fit the engine well, especially if you're playing the Austrians as the AI often seems incapable of pushing French forces across the Danube river that dominates much of the battlefield. An example: one campaign battle saw only a third of the Austrian forces present not only holding off the whole French force, but going on the offensive.

After the *Wagram* experience, you approach *Kursk* with more than a little nervousness, for the *Panzer Campaigns* battles have tended to be either fluid, interesting settings or over-detailed slogging matches… and most of them are huge. You boot up *Kursk*, jump immediately to the main campaign scenario, and it seems your worst fears are about to be realized: you see a tremendous map with the solid, bulging lines that existed at the opening of the Kursk battle, and a huge number of troops. "Oh no!" you think, "more grinding tedium!" But then you discover a few new features Tiller has implemented for this title: on map battle results, AI firing (to let the computer finish up firing units for you), and—most especially—the rapid resolution of AI turns. This last feature alone is wonderful: where a full campaign turn could take well over half an hour to watch, you can now flash through it in under five minutes. Sure, you miss the detailed results, but those really aren't necessary. The only feature that might be nice to have is an end-of-turn listing of events, perhaps tied in to an on-screen highlighting of affected hexes. Still, these features make the battle of Kursk very playable, especially in the smaller, shorter scenarios (which comprise the bulk of the game).

Tsushima solves the problem of tedium by going real-time, or adjustable-time (including—in single player, at least—the option to pause and give orders). The game covers the climactic naval battle in the oft-forgotten Russo-Japanese War of 1904-1905. You take on (more or less) the role of one side's fleet commander; while you can direct the movement of individual ships, you usually issue orders to formations as a whole. Hard-core naval fans will miss the many details often present in such games but not in *Tsushima*, while those looking for a command-level simulation will wonder why they have to specifically order the firing of individual ships' torpedoes and mines, and why there's basically no representation of command-and-control. If, however, you're looking for an accessible naval-flavored game, *Tsushima* can be surprisingly engaging, and the AI, while conservative, is the strongest of any of the three games. For such gamers, the greatest weakness may be a lack of legs. There is no "operational" level where you maneuver and hunt for enemy forces (all scenarios begin with you already in tactical contact with the enemy), and the real-time nature of the scenarios means you'll probably get through most of them in short order. The included scenario editor will help here, but a random battle generator would've been even better. Still and all, *Tsushima* provides a nice, fast-playing alterative to the average Tiller design. —*Scott Udell*

[All games] DEVELOPER John Tiller • PUBLISHER HPS Simulations • ESRB Not Rated

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The Complexity of Toad Slime

Europa 1400: The Guild

★★★½

Spend money on your business to increase efficiency, develop safeguards against robbery, and ensure the welfare of your employees.

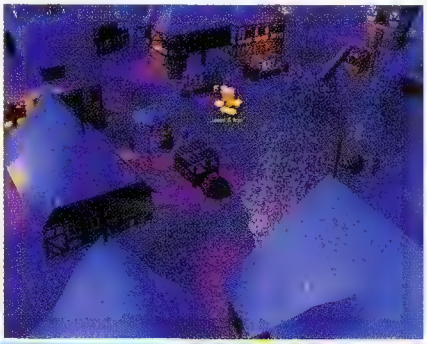
EUROPA 1400: THE GUILD is sort of like a role-playing game… except that you play a villager in a medieval town (circa 1400) instead of a wizard or an elf, spend points on skills such as Handicraft and Rhetoric rather than Strength and Dexterity, and run a business rather than plumb dungeons. You can be an artisan and spend your time manufacturing merchandise and selling it in a dynamic marketplace. You can run the local thieves' guild and make a living by peppering the marketplace with pickpockets and by robbing local businesses. You can dabble in politics to make your business more profitable, court a wife or husband (you'll need an heir to continue playing after your avatar dies), gamble at the local tavern, and hold dinner parties. It is as open-ended as it sounds, and the game tops it all with a slick system of goals that lets you choose your challenges and, when you finish them, choose new ones.

Town life is a fascinatingly complex system in which everything that one character (player or AI) does influences everything else. If you make your living by selling Poisoned Daggers, other characters can buy them and use them against you. When your shipment of Toad Slime (don't ask) is waylaid en route to the marketplace, it is not just a random event—another character is acting against you. You can hire a spy to gather dirt and then blackmail him or have him thrown in prison. If he is not doing anything illegal, run for town office and change the laws.

Complexity is the game's Achilles' Heel, and a clumsy interface compounds the problem. Moving from room to room in various 3D-modeled buildings around town to access important game functions feels more like searching through submenus than role-playing, and once you get where you are going, you end up having to use a menu anyway. It would have been simpler to make all the game menus accessible from the town view. Confusing documentation and a smattering of game text in German do not help matters.

It will take at least a full game or two (or three) before you have any idea what you are doing, but even before you learn the ropes, *Europa 1400: The Guild* is strangely addictive. Hiding under all the complexity is a fascinating system with loads of replayability. And Toad Slime. *—Benjamin E. Sones*

DEVELOPER 4HEAD Studios • PUBLISHER JoWood Productions • ESRB Teen



EUROPA 1400: You can choose your friends, but you can't choose your family. Well, all right—you can; [right] The main interface features a 3D view of your town; you access many of the game functions by entering buildings.

Charming Nostalgia

Tony Tough and the Night of the Roasted Moths

★★★½

POINDEXTER, STEVE URKEL, *The Simpsons*' Martin Prince, and Tony Tough, Private Dick—all virtual epitomes of nerddom. Tony Tough, who is actually the antithesis of "tough," heads up the retro 2D adventure *Tony Tough and the Night of the Roasted Moths* as he engages in the investigation of his lost purple dog, Pantagruel. The dog is actually a tapir, but why quibble?

The entire game takes place in three basic areas, the largest of which is bizarre Halloween Park, where Tony conducts the bulk of his inquiries. But there are many fabulous and quirky locations that should delight longtime adventure fans, although you might experience some video glitches and slowdown in certain environments.

It's not the most ambitious design around, but talk about retro…it reads like

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PC CD-ROM

TEEN T CONTENT RATED BY ESRB
Violence
Guano

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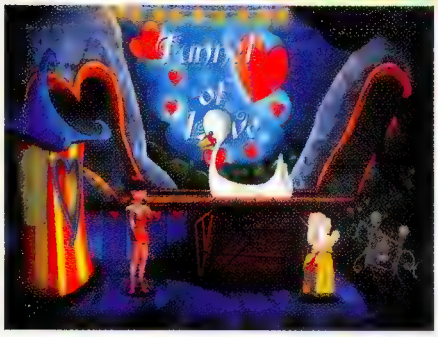


TONY TOUGH: The bearded lady truly has her mother's smile. In that trunk, in fact; There's just no talking this lady into the Tunnel of Love.

a parody portrait of long-gone adventures like *Day of the Tentacle*, and members the *Monkey Island* series. While the art is not as sophisticated as you may recall from the last *Monkey Island*, it is bright and charming, with well-defined (albeit somewhat stereotypical) characters that indulge in some excellent, if a bit sophomoric, dialogue.

If you don't race to the finish by plowing through the puzzles, you'll find some wickedly good humor in situations as well as conversations—if you have at least a modicum of appreciation for anything *South Park*. And speaking again of retro, unlike the newer, story-heavy *Longest Journey*-type games, this is a world of puzzles, most done in the combining-items-with-one-another-and-using-them-on-the-environment style of play, with various subtle clues and many red herrings. Use several items to costume a trashcan as a ghost in order to distract a nicotine-addicted clown? How absolutely intuitive! Maybe not, but you can wimp out in "Easy" mode if you like.

Lots to do, attention to detail, excrement jokes, and solid gameplay make this worthy of attention from old-school adventurers, and newer players should enjoy it as well. While you're waiting for the *Sam & Max* sequel, you might want to give this a try. Finally another game that absolutely *reeks* of nostalgia. Ahhh. —*Cindy Yans*

DEVELOPER Prograph Research • PUBLISHER Got Game Entertainment • ESRB Teen

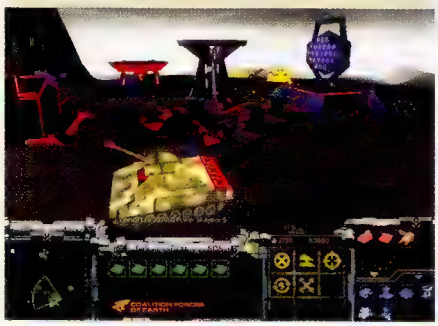
Starcrafted Awfulitude

Militarism

THE KLIGAN BASE attacks some satellite—oh no!—and then some *Legend of Zelda* music plays and some other stuff happens. And then Earth Space Station explodes—oh no!—and some jets fly around and then a giant fake word, more a George Bushism than a game title, flies onto the screen: *Militarism*. You have just witnessified the intro. It goes downhillwards from here.

The combativity of this game plays far too fast and the interfacedness is far too obtuse.

Real time strategy or full-color Rorschach test? You decide.



The graphicality is chunkly, dotted, overdark, and weirdness, but at least it's full of various colorationisms. The balancitude between the sides? Who can say! Human tanks and walkers in wardom against alien battle bots like Bug, Dog, and Ghost. There is purchasism of unit upgrades and spellistic abilities. It's ultimately all very Starcraftness, with Vultures, Battlecruisers, and crystal to be harvested.

Militarism is a game you've played before and probably forgotten by now. Whether it was called *Dominion*, *Dark Colony*, or *Tribal Rage*, it's been done just as poorly before. This is a holdover from the days of those terribly generic, painfully underdone, "what were they thinking?" real-time strategy games that just didn't get it and had the lack of resources during the development process to prove it. If there's a shred of imagination or creativity here, it's buried underneath horrible production values (you have to see these unit models to believe them!) and pointlessly complicated interface problems (the camera control is unlike any you've ever experienced!).

Militarism is most notable for having been developed in China, which makes this affront to computer gaming the entertainment equivalent of nudging one of their jets into one of our surveillance planes. And while *Militarism* may not qualify as an international incident, it can't be faulted for not trying. —*Tom Chick*

DEVELOPER Prograph Research • PUBLISHER Got Game Entertainment • ESRB Teen

bargain bin

Star Trek Voyager: Elite Force

A ten-spot will now get you one of the best Star Trek games ever released. *Star Trek Voyager: Elite Force* may use the license of the sucky TV show, but Raven Software has dumped Captain Janeway's moralistic whining in favor of lots of phaser firing. The only drawback is you can't fire said phasers at Janeway. [Activision/2000]

I-Triguingly Cool

I-Trigue 2.1 3300

★★★★½

NOT EVERYBODY HAS the budget for $300 speakers. There are cheap 4.1 and 5.1 systems out there, but many gamers don't have the space to put speakers behind them or the desire to run wires all over their bedroom, den, living room, or home dungeon. Sometimes you're just looking for a great inexpensive pair of speakers to sit on your desk without being an eyesore.

Creative's first product under a new I-Trigue brand is just such a system. The small 25-watt subwoofer won't gobble up much shelf or floor space, and while its tendency to rumble and buzz with heavy bass make it the weakest part of this system, it's comparable to what you find in other $100 setups. The totally slick little satellite towers each house three identical 9-watt speakers and do an admirable job of providing clear mid-range and high tones. At under 9" tall and only a couple inches deep, these little aluminum sound sticks are so stylish you'll be happy to plop them down next to your monitor. Creative rounds out the package with a wired desktop control that packs volume and bass level knobs together with a headphone jack.

Mind you, these aren't meant for extreme listening. They're general use speakers optimized for listening to music or playing games at "they're trying to watch TV in the next room" volumes, not "6.5 on the Richter Scale" levels. If you belong in the category of people that don't want, can't use, or can't afford anything more, this is a terrific combination of quality, value, and style. *–Jason Cross*

Creative I-Trigue 2.1 3300 • MSRP $99

High-end Challenger

Logitech Z-680

★★★★

THESE HIGH-END 5.1 speakers from Logitech are the first to seriously challenge Klipsch's position as the leader in big-ticket desktop PC sound systems. The set is marketed as a 500-watt system, though the technical specifications describe a 185-watt subwoofer and five 53-watt satellites, and by our math, that's "only" 450 watts (not that the wattage ratings for speaker systems are all that reliable or important). Any way you slice it, this puts out as much sound as you would expect from a $400 set of PC speakers, which is to say it's enough to annoy your neighbors. Down the street.

The quality of the sound is far more important than how loud it gets, and it's here that the Z-680s make their mark. Sound reproduction from low to high is remarkably even and accurate. Whether watching DVDs, playing games, or listening to music, you distinctly hear every nuance of the source material without distortion.

The control module that sits on your desk is a bit on the large side, with a handy LCD readout that perhaps could use a little more contrast. That you plug in the wires from your PC, coaxial SPDIF, or optical input into the control module likely necessitates its size. With integrated Dolby Digital and Pro Logic II decoders, and a nice little infrared remote, this is a great system to pull double duty on a PC and some console systems.

Thus, there's little problem in heartily recommending these speakers, though it's not completely without reservation. Having all of the input wires clogging up the desk is unfortunate, and there's an uneven "jumping" quality to adjusting the volume. Plus…well…they're $400, and that's just a whole lot to spend on a PC speaker set of any quality. But if that's your budget, this is a set worth opening your ears to. *–JC*

Logitech Z-680 • MSRP $399

Sound Choices

Fortissimo III 7.1 / Digfire 7.1

★★★★ ★★★★

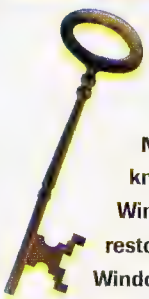
THE LATEST SOUND cards from Hercules use the same Crystal SoundFusion 4624 audio processor found in its older Fortissimo II sound card. It's a good chip, and along with Hercules' good driver work can easily handle all your typical gaming needs: quality DirectSound 3D or EAX acceleration with low impact on your CPU. In fact, these two sound cards share more than the same processor—they're virtually identical. They both support up to 7.1 speaker setups (which is complete overkill), have optical SPDIF connectors, output up to 20bit 48KHz sound streams, and come bundled with Power DVD Pro EX and Acid XPress. The Digifire distinguishes itself by adding on two FireWire ports and includes PowerDirector Pro video editing software. They even use the same driver set. Given the similarity, you have to wonder why they're sold under different brand names.

The sound quality is quite good, with little noise or distortion and certainly not enough to notice when playing games or listening to music on anything but the very best speakers and source material. It's no Audigy 2, but then we're talking about cards that cost half as much. During testing using the latest drivers, there were no audio glitches or unexpected behavior, which is about all you can ask for from a compatibility standpoint.

The only question, then, is if you want to shell out $30 to have FireWire included on your sound card. It's convenient and saves PCI slots, but if you replace it you lose your FireWire port. FireWire or no, Hercules' latest sound cards are solid offerings that will do any gamer right, even if they don't represent the very pinnacle of audio technology. *–JC*

Hercules Fortissimo III 7.1 / Digifire 7.1 • MSRP $50 / $80

tip of the month



That Darn Windows Key

Hate the Windows key? Maybe you just don't know what it can do! Hit Windows-D to minimize or restore all windows. Windows-R opens the Run menu. Windows-F opens up a Find Files or Folders windows (local search). Windows-F1 takes you instantly to the help center.

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BUY MORE STOCK
UNTIL YOU'RE STINKING RICH

CCP

ALIENWARE

TEEN

CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

VIOLENCE

Game Experience May Change During Online Play

FINDERS KEEPERS

SCORE A RARE BLUEPRINT
SELL COPIES OR KEEP THE
PATENT FOR YOURSELF
THERE'S NO ANTI-TRUST
IN SPACE

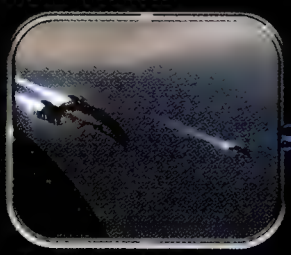
TURN GARBAGE
INTO GOLD

SALVAGE WRECKAGE
TURN TRASH INTO CASH

WHO NEEDS
WALL STREET

FORM A CORPORATION
BUILD SPACE STATIONS
TO HOUSE MERCENARIES

FORM A CARTEL



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applied game theory

Playing Together, Staying Together

Making family game design more than child's play

BY HENRY JENKINS AND KURT SQUIRE

Each Holiday season, the Lion and the Lamb Project, a group of parents concerned about the marketing of violence as "child's play," issues its Dirty Dozen list identifying twelve toys—mostly computer games—parents should avoid. Announcing this year's list, Daphne White, the group's spokesman, intensified her campaign against *Grand Theft Auto III: Vice City*, claiming that the video game industry's pursuit of adults comes at the expense of imaginative and engaging games for younger children.

While we strongly disagree with their push for stronger regulation of content, we believe the group does important work in two ways: first, in helping parents to understand that not all videogames are appropriate for young children and second, in pressuring the game industry to continue to do imaginative work for kids. Historically, it has divided the adult and children's markets, but there is tremendous creative and market potential for multiplayer games that span those demographics.

Quick question: What game has sold more copies than *The Sims*, *Grand Theft Auto*, and every EA Sports game combined? The answer: *Monopoly*. Since 1935, it's sold over 200 million copies, in part because it's a game the whole family can play. Where is *Monopoly*'s digital equivalent? What might a family-friendly computer game look like?

"What game has sold more copies than The Sims, Grand Theft Auto, and every EA Sports game combined?"

Consider *Animal Crossing*, a multiplayer "animal village simulation" for the GameCube. Players buy and decorate homes, chat with other villagers, run errands for the local shopkeeper, and compete in fishing contests or collect insects for the local museum. *Animal Crossing's* gameplay shares much with *The Sims*, focusing on home decoration and social interaction.

Perhaps the most innovative element is its asynchronous persistent world: meaning that the game is a multiplayer placespace that persists across sessions, like an *EverQuest*, but players don't need to be logged on at the same time. One person might play for thirty minutes in the morning while others play after school or at night, but they all inhabit the same game world. Players can create and trade items, exchange letters, post messages on community bulletin boards, or interact with the gameworld.

At first glance, such simple game interactions as growing flowers may sound mundane, but imagine your spouse's frustration when she discovers that you chopped down her beloved tree for firewood. Or imagine the simple pleasures of your best friend leaving you a note to go to the fresh market on Sunday morning for some produce she needs to complete a quest. Families of all types live increasingly disjointed lives, but the whole family can play *Animal Crossing* even if they can rarely all sit down to dinner together. When families do gather, the game offers common points of reference and projects to discuss. At its best, it harkens back to the intense social interactions that surrounded *Monopoly*, *Risk*, or *Life*.

Animal Crossing binds the world clock to your game system clock, creating game play elements linked to real world calendars. Log into the game on a Sunday morning and you'll find a thriving market. It snows on wintry days. On Halloween, town folk go trick or treating. And of course, there are special gifts on birthdays and holidays. These timed events give players reasons for regular play. Persistent world games could learn from this by realizing that no one can play 24/7 and by giving players real incentives for interacting with others. The contests in *The Sims Online*, which allow housemates to work together for common goals, similarly encourage collaborative asynchronous play and regular participation.

We have only scratched the surface here. The thought bubbles over the animals' heads are inspired by classic cartoons and breathe life into relatively simple characters. In the games most celebrated feature, players can move to new towns by taking their games to new machines via memory cards or hooking up their Game Boy Advances to their GameCubes. When our lives are geographically dispersed, why constrain games to one machine or platform? Why not leverage this disjointedness, encouraging us to take our game characters to other folks' homes to play? This blurring of the single player/multiplayer distinction is particularly well suited for the PC, which is often shared among family members. Why do so many computer games assume single-player rather than social play?

As the PC gamer demographic matures, players will demand both adults-only and family-friendly games. *Animal Crossing* provides one model for "family gaming." Hopefully, other developers, particularly on the PC, will also embrace this design challenge rather than designing only for adults.

Henry Jenkins and Kurt Squire run the Games to Teach Project at MIT. Jenkins is the Director of the Comparative Media Studies Program; Squire is finishing his doctoral degree in Education from Indiana University. More information on the program can be found at cms.mit.edu/games/education

Tomorrow's Addicts Today

Disney's golden book of massively multiplayer online games

BY CINDY YANS

Sometime late last year, Disney asked me to take a look at its upcoming massively multiplayer online role-playing game, *ToonTown*. Although it skewed a bit young for our core readership—its actual target audience is kids ages 6-12—I eventually took a look at it and was a bit surprised to find that this game's mechanics are almost identical to those of more "sophisticated" games.

In a nutshell, Evil Cogs have taken over ToonTown, and it's up to You to get them outta there. After the ceremonial (and interminable) download of The Patch, the End User License Agreement screen awaited. You know, the one where you click "I agree" without reading it. I mean, after all, how many 6-year-olds are going to read the EULA anyway?

Disney, being Disney, requires a Parental Control Password, which Mom, Dad, or Responsible Adult X (or, hey, the six-year-old) must enter to enable the Secret Friend feature. Against my better judgment, I clicked on "More Information" about the Secret Friends. Over six pages of excruciatingly detailed text explained how a parent needed to provide express approval every time his or her charge proffers or receives an invitation to become someone's Secret Friend, because this bond allows [gasp] "actual keyboard chat." Examples abounded. Say, if Sally was Mike's Secret Friend, and Mike was Jessica's Secret Friend, this does not make Sally Jessica's Secret Friend. Sally needs to make a separate request to cement the Sally-Jessica Secret Friendship. This, of course, illustrates that the Secret Friend connection does not retain the transitive property.

Mickey and Minnie drag you through character creation, and you choose your race, physical makeup, and armor, er, "outfit" from a large easily navigable selection. I ended up with a tall, female, periwinkle-colored rabbit with a green and red outfit and protruding teeth, whose name was... OK, just to see how robust the name filter was, I avoided all the usual suspects, and tried "Dick Dirtbag." It was summarily rejected. Then I tried "Idun Geevasheet." This was marginally more successful, eliciting the message, "The Toon Council will review your name. While you wait, your name will be Periwinkle Rabbit. It might take several days to process your request."

Disappointed, I just used the "build a name" feature to christen myself Lady Jellyroll Frinkelmuffin.

Finally, it was time for the ToonTorial. Navigate here, navigate there, click on the GUI elements, and then go out and kill—er, "destroy" (there is no killing in *ToonTown*)—a Flunky Bot. Kind of like the usual rat, bat, snail, snake, etc. Combat, such that it is, consists of using "gags" to make the Cogs so angry that they sort of explode into the atmosphere, leaving only a cloud of...cog-parts. Your weapons are pies to throw (0-4 max damage) and squirting corsages (0-3 max damage), and your own "hitpoint" meter is a smiling face in the lower left of the interface that loses "teeth" when you get hit and, each time, it becomes "sadder." Eventually, when all is lost, the face turns green with a protruding tongue and Xs over its eyes. You're dead, Jim. But no corpse retrieval, no resurrections... you simply return to the central Playground until you become once again "happy" over time. As you do progress through combat, your skills improve ("you have become better at squirting"), and you gain more gags/levels.

"I approached Wilbur Sparklebocker and invited him to be my Secret Friend."

Step-and-fetch quests pepper the beginning of the game and then you get the "You're probably not strong enough to do this on your own, return to me when you have made a friend." I froze. Which of these 6-12 year olds could I possibly approach? I looked at Princess Drippy but she was AFK (illustrated by a chat bubble indicating "Zzzzzzz"), then, resolutely, I approached Wilber Sparklebocker (I'm not kidding), and invited him to be my Secret Friend. He (and his Mommy, apparently) complied, and I said "Hey there Wilber! Good to meet you." He said, "sjfdkfe9;ve0ow-4-8-432iks;dkd;" His Mom said, "Oh... hee hee, so sorry, he just pounds on the keyboard. Amos is only three." Amos? Fine.

No gold or plat here...instead, you gain jellybeans with which to purchase more gags. I can do wonders with a sniper rifle, but make me swim through hoops, dive into a water tower, play tug-o-war...I was completely pathetic. Nonetheless I did accrue jellybeans (there's always some reward no matter how lame the effort) and persevered. Later, I created Professor Nutmeg Dizzenbump. He's still fishing at the ToonTown Playground Dock where griefers jump into the water every time he tries to reel in a catch.

The limited version is free. You can get it at www.toontown.com. And there are two plusses. You can Alt-Tab out of it if anyone you know walks by, *and* you can probably hawk most of those jellybeans on e-Bay.

Send in the Virgins

Picking up newbies along the road to completion

BY PHIL STEINMEYER

At the time of this writing, *Tropico 2: Pirate Cove* is seven weeks from completion and looking very good. However, in trying to give the gamer the best possible experience, from the first time they launch the game through the end of a long campaign, we've bumped into a problem. We have no *Tropico* "virgins" anymore.

Game fans often blast developers in public forums for making games with baffling interfaces and counter-intuitive gameplay. If a consumer can spot the flaws in the game within an hour of installing it, why can't the developer find and fix those flaws in the years they spent developing it?

Often, the answer is not inexperience on the part of the developer; rather, it's too much experience. When you stare at the same game, 10 hours a day and six days a week for months and years of development, you lose sight of everything except whatever minor feature you're developing at that moment. Not only do you miss the forest for the trees, you can't see the trees because all those bark-covered columns are blocking your view. Game developers build in cheat and debug keys to bypass the primary interface and jump straight into the parts of the game they're currently making. When the game is released and end-users can't figure out the interface, it's often because the developers haven't really been using the interface themselves. If users can't enjoy their first 15 minutes with the game, they'll quit right then and never discover all the fun toys you've buried in the depths of the campaign.

"But a demo is only a partial solution, so we'll be bringing in a supplemental supply of *Tropico 2* newbies."

The ideal solution is for a good external producer to keep an eye on the game, occasionally having others who are novices to the game try it out as well. Unfortunately, PopTop is the external producer for *Tropico 2*. Almost everyone here, including the game's primary producer and myself, spent over two years burning ourselves out on the original and are hardly in a position to look at its sequel with fresh eyes. The handful of people we've hired since we finished *Tropico* mainly came knocking on our door as major fans, and played it to death on their own time.

Plan B is to use our publisher's full-time testing group in Baltimore. Unfortunately, that group also tested *Tropico* and its various expansions and editions. Even though game testing is a notoriously high-turnover profession, that group has performed the minor miracle of keeping pretty much the same team in place for several years. Good for them, but bad for us in finding virgins.

So now we're on to plans C and D. We will release a public demo of *Tropico 2* over the 'net. Pre-release public demos are frustrating for the developers but good for the game itself. Putting together the demo steals precious time from finishing the game. It is usually a bit rough around the edges—the game is unfinished, of course—and the kind of gamers who download enormous demos off the Internet are an unforgiving group. Developers have to be wearing flame-retardant underwear to brave the response forums for these demos. Still, a trial by fire helps the developer pinpoint the areas that need tweaking. And if the game looks good at the demo stage, public buzz will build and the game will hopefully launch strong.

But a demo is only a partial solution, so we'll be bringing in a supplemental supply of *Tropico 2* newbies. We're advertising on our web site for local gamers to come in on weekends and playtest the game with us standing behind them. The toughest part of watching someone play is when the tester is confused, say, about how to launch a pirate ship. The button is right there on the interface, but if they overlook the button, or go off in a different direction, or just generally don't understand the game, there is a very strong temptation to help the player out and tell them what to do. Unfortunately, it is not possible to put a member of the development team in every shipped box of the game; since end-users will be forced to figure the game out on their own, we must avoid telling our testers what to do and let them figure it out on their own. If they can't, we know that part of the game needs tuning. They get confused, so the end user doesn't have to.

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PC Zone

TEEN T CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

PC CD ROM

Release March 2003

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TRI SYNERGY

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Mission Not-So-Impossible

What to do when crossbreeding ants with apes gets dull

BY BRETT TODD

Relic Entertainment's plans for the *Impossible Creatures* engine are almost as ambitious as the game itself. The first real-time strategy that allows you to custom-build your units from an almost unlimited menagerie of animals has also been designed as a platform for all sorts of modding endeavors. Making the game mod-friendly has been a top priority since day one, a fact that's readily apparent from a look at both the engine architecture and the online Relic Developer Network (RDN).

"In the past few years, a lot of developers have realized just how important the fan base is, and how mods help extend the product's lifecycle," explains *Impossible Creatures* programmer Drew Dunlop. "*Impossible Creatures* was built to be 'modable' on two levels. First, we have a complete set of content creation tools that are currently available for download from the RDN website. With these tools the mod community can create new art content for the game. The second modable portion is the support for end users to create a code mod for the game. This will be facilitated through a software development kit available for download from our RDN website."

> *"...courting the mod community is only the first step, and it won't mean much in the end if the game tanks at the sales counter."*

The decision to emphasize mod support came about after Relic noticed a lot of modding efforts centered on its previous release, *Homeworld*. According to *Impossible Creatures* assistant producer Jennifer Hawke, the company was "surprised and delighted" over the online demand for *Homeworld* mods. This prompted the decision to offer tools, tutorials, and the support of the RDN for future releases. An in-house training session informally called IC University was also held last November. Developers provided "detailed tutorials as well as question-and-answer sessions in a classroom-like environment" to get top members of the modding community from across the globe up to speed on what Relic was doing.

Hawke hopes that Relic's efforts will pay off with lots of user-created content showing up online in the following months. Players have been given the tools needed to create just about anything they desire for the original game—from additions to the already impressive animal kingdom provided out-of-the-box to new maps and multiplayer rules—along with total conversions that use the engine to create new games.

"New animals and maps would be great for the existing online players and community, but RDN definitely doesn't stop there," says Hawke. "We are expecting both data mods and total conversions, which are basically whole new games. Simply speaking, it is possible to create an entirely new RTS game with the *Impossible Creatures* engine with the tools made available via RDN. We've already seen some amazing and crazy ideas take shape on the community websites and forums."

So, the sky's the limit...as long as *Impossible Creatures* takes off at retail. Just last year Gas Powered Games made the same claims about the engine powering *Dungeon Siege*, but those grandiose plans came to very little as the game never got popular enough to inspire a modding community of significant size. Relic has learned from Gas Powered Games's mistakes, however, by providing more extensive online support as well as getting the ball rolling early, training top modders at IC University. But courting the mod community is only the first step, and it won't mean much in the end if the game tanks at the sales counter.

Still, you can't help but be impressed at what Relic is doing here. Unlike so many other developers and publishers, who either expect the mod community to fend for itself online or hold back software development kits for years while they crank out one mediocre expansion pack after another, Relic is working hard at giving its customers the most bang for their buck. No matter how things turn out for *Impossible Creatures*, this is a philosophy that should be adopted across the gaming industry.

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Less is More

Simplification is the key

BY JASON CROSS

Master 32 weapons with alternate fire modes! Blast your way through 87 levels! Command hundreds of different units among six totally unique races! Power up over 30 skills!

The people that market games virtually scream about the breadth of a game's content in bullet points on the back of game boxes, in advertisements, and in pitches to the press. Gamers buy into it. Remember when they cut a unit from *WarCraft III*? The message boards an inboxes were positively alight with the flames of raving fanboys who already imagined themselves bowling over their enemies with it.

Worse, game makers often buy into it. What possible use does anyone playing *Unreal Tournament 2003* have for 11 weapons with two firing modes each, plus the translocator, can't forget about that. Many of these 22 or more firing modes are functionally equivalent. The link gun's primary fire might as well be the minigun, given how it's used, and the assault rifle is still a useless toy that players discard as soon as possible. Strategy game makers feel compelled to offer as many distinct units as they possibly can, with as many upgrades and special abilities as possible. All this does is hide deeper strategy under layers of complexity, where only the smallest percentage of expert players can find it.

"Depth does not come from lots of stuff."

Let's consider some real-world games for a moment. Chess might be the deepest game on earth, but what does it look like in PC strategy game terms? There are only six different units, none of which offers upgrades. There is one uninteresting level, no unit or building construction, and castling is the only thing close to a special attack. But by the end of a person's very first game of chess, they are completely familiar with the mechanics of the game and need only worry about strategy. Not a drastic enough example for you? Consider the Japanese game Go, which some would argue is an even deeper strategy game than chess. In it, players do nothing more than place down a single white or black stone each turn on the intersections of a 19x19 grid, with the goal of surrounding the other player's stones. That's it. One unit, one level, no upgrades, no special attacks, nothing.

I'm not sure why, but human beings instantly gravitate toward abstract simplicity. Why do we love comic books and cartoons? Something about the simple nature of the artwork (compared to pictures of real people) resonates with us, amplifying rather than diluting reality. Why do we see a circle, two dots, and a curved line as a smiling face? And why did the smiley face become wildly more popular than a realistic photo of a smiling person could ever hope to be? Perhaps because it's deeper; through its simplicity, it reflects pure joy better than detail or realism ever could.

A lot of content in a game simply makes it take longer for players to learn the ins-and-outs of each level, weapon, unit, special attack, upgrade, or building before they can intuitively piece them all together in their minds and think about the game at a higher level, one in which they're unconcerned with the mechanics of what to do right now and instead think solely about some grand long-term winning strategy. Chess and Go expose this level of thought immediately. *WarCraft III* exposes this thought after many hours of play, maybe. For most *Unreal Tournament 2003* players, such a battle plan never emerges.

With its impending release on the PC, I feel I should talk about *Halo* as an example of the right way to do it. There are only about 10 weapons in the game, most with only one firing mode. What's more, you can only carry two at a time, including the one you're currently using. Is this limiting? Yes! And thank God for it. Because your choices are limited, a deeper strategy immediately emerges. You stop thinking about picking up everything in sight and starting making interesting decisions. Do I take that plasma rifle, or am I going to find more ammo for my shotgun soon? With this outdoor terrain, am I going to find more use for the pistol's zoom function or the needler's homing capabilities? Depth is all about making interesting decisions, and as repetitive as the level design in *Halo* is, the game never stops presenting you with them. The higher level of play emerges quickly, and you find yourself not thinking about dodging, strafing, and aiming, but turn your attention instead to short-term plans about how to flush out entrenched enemies, out-flank a rush of bad guys, or find some cover to recharge your failing shields.

Depth does not come from lots of stuff. It comes from the complex interactions of simple things and from a casual familiarity that lets the player devote their thoughts to higher strategy and interesting decisions above base reactions. An excess of content all but ruined some nice real-world games like *Magic The Gathering*, and it constantly ruins many promising PC games. Let's all—consumers and game makers alike—turn our attention to the elegance of simple things that need no explanation. You know what they say about still waters.

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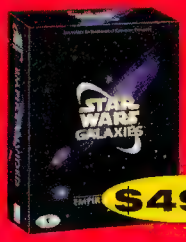

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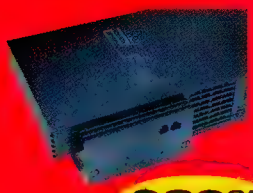
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Our Fight for Freedom

Just say no to Joe

BY TOM CHICK

We had another chance at the national media spotlight during the sniper attacks in Washington, but we didn't make the cut because itinerant snipers Malvo and Muhammed didn't have a laptop with *Soldier of Fortune* installed on it. But now that Connecticut senator Joseph Lieberman is running for the Democratic presidential nomination, we've got another chance.

As any gamer who can't be bothered to actually read the facts knows, Lieberman wants to ban all computer and video games. Or maybe just impose strict government censorship that will only allow games like *Pokemon* to get made.

> *"What message does it send to children when you can walk into someone's house and pee on the floor in* The Sims*?"*

Something along those lines. Whatever it is he's trying to do, it's pretty cool, because it means we can band together to fight his repressive anti-gamer policies. There's an old saying that goes something like, "first they came for my copy of *Grand Theft Auto* and I said nothing...". We all know how that one turns out. One day you have to be over 17 to buy *Blood Omen 2* from Toys R Us and the next day the government is seizing *Taboo* from your coat closet before you can even salvage the batteries from that buzzer.

Lieberman has threatened to propose legislation that would fine retailers who sell M-rated games to minors, much like the legislation that holds retailers accountable for selling pornography, cigarettes, and alcohol. It's a terrible thing, expecting stores to enforce ratings. The stores have a job to do, and that's to sell stuff. Lieberman is violating their constitutional right to make money when he expects children to be protected from violent content. We all know that's the parents' responsibility. How dare Lieberman try to saddle retailers with that burden! If your kid comes home with a copy of *Diablo II*, don't blame Blizzard or Wal-Mart. Blame yourself for raising a kid who tried to buy it in the first place. Sit down with him and have one of those family values heart-to-hearts like you see on television. And then take to the streets to stop the tyranny of Lieberman.

We're on the front line and we have to band together against him. Actually, console gamers are on the front line and we're sort of the auxiliary troops. When Lieberman talks about his Draconian measures, he tends to focus on console games. I guess he didn't see that episode of *Dateline* last December when 10-year-old kids were able to buy copies of *Max Payne* and *Kingpin* from a Wal-Mart. Which begs the question "What kind of crappy backwater Wal-Mart still carries *Kingpin*?"

Please, Senator Lieberman, don't forget us PC gamers. The next time you hold a press conference to threaten more Congressional hearings or to complain that ratings aren't being observed, could you mention titles like *Mafia, Ghost Recon,* and *No One Lives Forever 2*? When you point out that there are a small number of games that "aren't pushing the envelope, they are shooting, torturing, and napalming it beyond all recognition and beyond all decency", could you not focus so much on *Vice City*? We have stuff like that, too. It's not our fault that most of it is forgettable tripe like *Postal* that no one buys. We're trying. We really are. Have you seen how you can blow someone's head off in *Unreal Tournament 2003*? Did you know you can level entire cities in *Sim City 4*? What message does it send to children when you can walk into someone's house and pee on the floor in *The Sims*? That can't be good for kids, can it?

What we really want is for people to talk about us so we get some mainstream cred. We just want to be as accepted as movies and TV. We just want a little slice of that controversy pie, like when theatre chains refuse to carry NC-17 movies or when someone shows his butt on *NYPD Blue* or two girls kiss on *Ally McBeal*. We want that kind of action so that one day people might stand around the water cooler on Monday morning and talk about what level they got to in *EverQuest* or how their clan did on a *Battlefield 1942* server.

But more importantly, we want the whole self-righteous indignation that brings us all together when we fight tyranny and oppression and reasonable restrictions. Because freedom means never having to say "I'm sorry, but you're too young to buy this."

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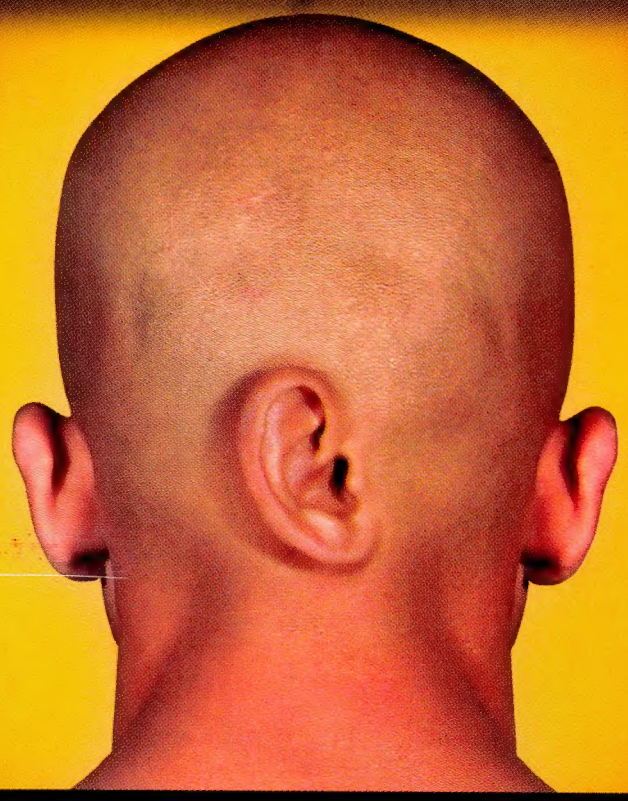

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